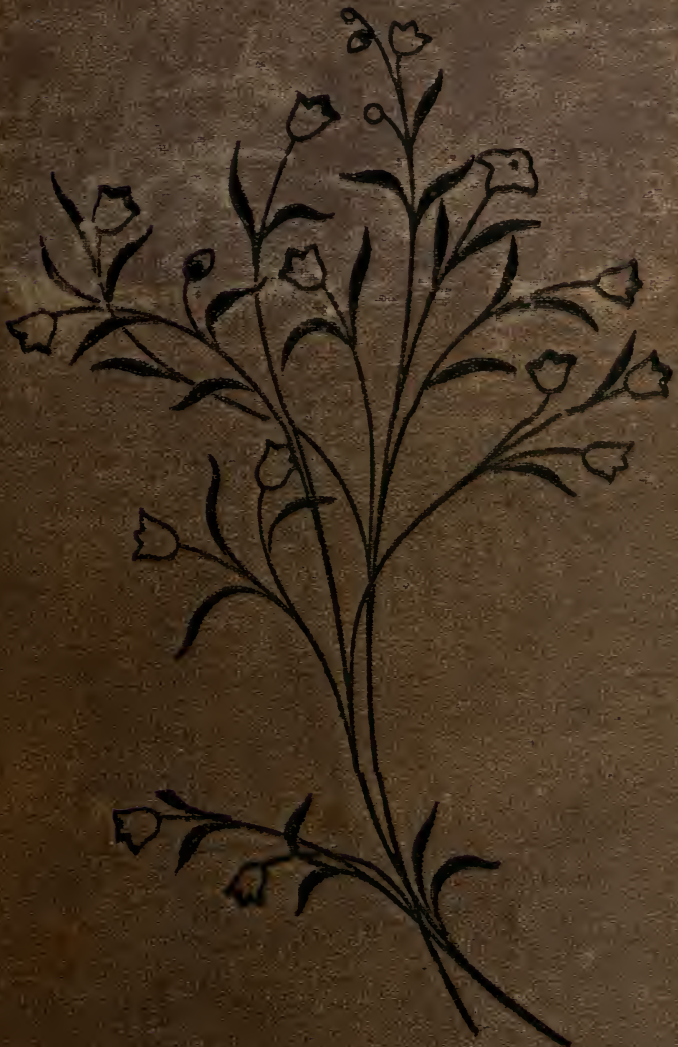

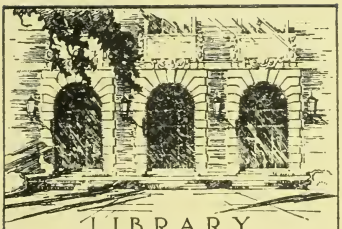

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Under One Roof

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UNDER ONE ROOF

An Episode in a Family History

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF 'BY PROXY' 'LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE PAINTED' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. II.

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UNDER ONE ROOF.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW ARRIVAL.

LIFE, even in this world, has its compensations; if a dull man bores and bores his company like the *Teredo navalis* till all hands are ready to sink, a bright and genial fellow will irradiate it; if the one is as a dead fly in the ointment of the apothecary, the other is like the quince in the apple-pie; its savour and fragrance permeate the whole dish, and rescue it from vapidity. Of the inmates of Halcombe Hall, as we have seen, there were several who were just now not having a very cheerful time of it. Evelyn, at once menaced and importuned, was compelled

to nurse the wrath which certainly did not require to be 'kept warm.' George Gresham felt his footing dangerous, and that unfathomable gulfs were being dug for him by the hand of his enemy. And to poor little Frankie the figure of pitiless John Groad always presented itself pointing to the gallows tree. These were not festive social elements; and if a bore had been introduced into the house upon the top of it all, existence at Halcombe would have been well nigh intolerable. Fortunately the new arrival, Mr. Frederic Mayne, was of quite a different species from the *Teredo*—instead of sinking ships, he buoyed them. Even vessels of heavy burthen—conversationally speaking, mere colliers—would become almost volatile when he attached himself to their side; his spirits were such that they could have raised wrecks. The mariner's calling has a tendency to make men dull; but though Mayne loved the sea, and almost lived upon it, it had not depressed him; if it had not been for his marine tastes, his companionship, perhaps, would have been

too much of a good thing: like that gay and thoughtless gentleman who had to be sandwiched between two clergymen before he was fit for general society.

His life had been remarkable: a cadet of an ancient and wealthy race, he had never envied his elder brother the fortune that was in store for him, nor indeed wasted a thought about it; and, cutting short a scholarless but not unexciting school time, had entered the navy under respectable auspices; his friends had consented to it, in preference to the only alternative he had proposed to himself, which was that of running away to sea. The inconveniences, not to say hardships, of this mode of life had not dismayed him as they dismay so many lads with similar aspirations, because all its disagreeables were mitigated by his overpowering sense of humour. Nevertheless this faculty was the cause of his abandoning a career in which, if opportunity had been granted him, he would perhaps have been another Dundonald, if not a Nelson.

His captain was stingy and punctilious; and

as the senior officer on his station these qualities became notorious. He was studiously careful not to be entrapped into hospitalities. On one occasion the 'young gentlemen' were ordered for 'signal practice,' which, as every one knows, consists in combinations of flags. The first combination which occurred to Mr. Frederic Mayne was this:—'Captain Blank invites all the Captains on the station to dinner!'

There were seven of them; and they came in full regimentals, each in his gig, at six o'clock, to find Captain Blank just sitting down to a small piece of pickled pork. Their host, who had no sense of humour, had a keen perception of ridicule, and he made things so unpleasant for Mr. Mayne that he eventually had to leave the ship. His elder brother, however, had the good feeling to decease at this critical epoch, and the midshipman became his own master, and the master of an immense income. Yielding for once to the advice of friends, he hereupon went to the University, where he fell in with George Gresham; and on obtaining his

degree returned to his first love, the sea, and bought a yacht. His native assurance (which was, however, far from impudence), joined to the confidence generally inspired by a great income, gave a rare intrepidity to the expression of his views; and, what was still rarer in so young a man, his views were mostly sound ones. Underneath his light and genial manner there was a substratum of good sense and good feeling, which made honest folks like Frederic Mayne the more, the more they knew of him. On the other hand, it must be confessed that folks who did not act upon the square had reason to complain of his manners. He had a natural antipathy to a rogue such as is seldom felt in these days, and still more seldom expressed. When other people would cautiously hint that Jones the Duke, or Jones the Dustman (for it was all one to the ex-midshipman) was 'shaky,' Mayne would state quite plainly, 'Jones is a scoundrel.' And all the 'shaky' folks (who are a numerous race) resented this.

If the midshipman had continued in his profession he would have found 'between decks' inconvenient as he grew up, for he was very tall. His complexion was difficult save for a metaphysician to speak of, because he had none; his face was bronzed by wind and weather and the salt foam; but if you could have got down to it, it would probably have been a fair one. His hair was light brown, and curled over his forehead like a boy's; his eyes were blue and laughing—but with a spice of mischief in them that redeemed their expression from that of mere good-nature.

His meeting with his old college friend at Archester was most cordial, and he had not been five minutes in the break before he had made friends with everybody. His manners had that charm of naturalness which dispenses with the formulas of introduction, and which, if they were but general, would save years of human life now wasted in the conventional twaddle that is considered necessary to first acquaintanceship. Before she got home even

Lady Arden had acknowledged to herself that Mr. Frederic Mayne was 'an acquisition'—a compliment she generally reserved for persons of title who came to settle in the neighbourhood. Milly was fairly enchanted with him, and would have shown her approbation openly but for the wicked raillery in which George had indulged at breakfast time. The new arrival had said something to interest or amuse every member of the party; not exclusive of little Frankie, to whom he told a dreadful ghost story, of how he was visited by a short but expansive being all in white. 'And what do you think it was?' he inquired, after the thrilling narrative.

'Well; I dare say it was only a nightmare,' said Frankie, made sceptical by the other's laughing eye.

'A very good shot, my boy. It was not a nightmare, however, but something very like it —it was a clothes-horse.'

You would never have guessed had you

seen the party drive up the avenue, laughing and chatting, that they had a stranger among them.

Sir Robert, as his custom was, stood at the door to welcome the visitor; and on him, too, by a few genuine expressions of admiration of the picturesqueness of the Hall, and its situation, the new arrival made a most favourable impression. A desert island—he did not add with Rabelais (on account of the ladies) ‘ with somebody kicking you behind ’—was said to be welcome, observed the guest, to a storm-tossed mariner like himself; how much more, then, must be the fairyland of Halcombe!

If his eye wandered unconsciously to Millicent, as if to include in his admiration the elves themselves, Lady Arden forgave it; for the maternal heart is placable towards young gentlemen with five thousand a year.

Evelyn's calm, cold looks—for he took the pain in them for coldness—surprised him even more than her beauty; he had a vague impression that she was engaged to his friend, and,

therefore, perhaps, expected a somewhat warmer greeting.

Mr. Ferdinand Walcot did not put in an appearance—which was no matter of disappointment. Mayne had heard all about him from Gresham, and not only quite understood that he should meet with no cordial reception from the ruling spirit of the Hall, but was quite prepared to do battle with him, if occasion offered. He was 'a warm friend,' and though it could not be added with justice, 'a bitter enemy,' he was wont to take up his friends' quarrels with considerable alacrity.

Under these circumstances it was rather curious that on the first occasion when Mr. Walcot and Mr. Mayne did meet—which was at the dinner-table that evening—they should find themselves on the same side in a certain argument.

Sir Robert, for a wonder, had happened to notice the depression of Frank's spirits, and, when the ladies had withdrawn, remarked upon it to his brother-in-law.

'I believe you were right in the matter of the lad's going to school, Ferdinand, after all,' he said. 'He seems to me to want tone.'

'Frank's nature is peculiar,' returned Walcot, who had, as we know, altered his views about Frank's going to school; 'his case is one, perhaps, in which the mother must be said to be the best judge, and I remember Lady Arden took a decided view.'

'Still a public school, as everybody says, when "tone" in a boy seems to be wanting,' pursued Sir Robert, with hesitation—'Eh, what do *you* say, Mr. Mayne?'

'Well, sir, it depends upon whether the school has got the tone to give him. All I can say is, mine had not, and it was a public one.'

'You hear that, Arden,' observed Mr. Walcot; 'you and I are only theorising about this matter, as we were both brought up under home influences; but this gentleman speaks from personal experience.'

'And, I am sorry to say, from anything but a pleasant one,' laughed Mr. Mayne. 'The

Public School interest is a very powerful one, and, therefore, many things are tolerated in it which would otherwise be scouted, just as happens on a smaller scale in the City.'

'But the public feeling of a public school is good, Mayne,' observed Gresham.

'It may be so, or not; it depends generally upon the character of one or two leading boys, and even upon the traditions they leave behind them.'

'The masters, however, are chosen with great care, I understand, and from the cream of their respective Universities,' remarked Sir Robert.

'Well, sir, the cream goes mainly to make the butter for the Professors,' answered Mayne; 'the masters, however, are well enough as a general rule, though I happened to fall in with a precious bad specimen. When I write my book called "Scoundrels I Have Met," he will occupy a prominent place in it.'

'It is not usual to find scoundrels among the scholars who form our public school masters,'

remarked Mr. Walcot, with a glance at his brother-in-law.

'Of course not; if it were so very common I would not trouble you with the details, but as it is they are curious. The man's name I have in my mind was Horner. He had his particular "favourites" among the boys, and, what was worse, his particular "aversions." He used to tamper with the marks in the class-book—just as the villain in "Never Too Late to Mend" altered the figures in the cranks. I remember a sharp bright-eyed little fellow of the name of Archer (very like your step-son Frank, Sir Robert, which, perhaps, reminded me of the occurrence) being persecuted by this man in the most wicked manner. He told lie after lie to get him flogged, and used the head master, who was a great stickler for discipline and authority, as a cat's-paw to carry out his baseness generally. The boy's character was utterly warped by him. The harm that scoundrel had it in his power to do was incalculable, and he did his worst.'

'I suppose he was not very fond of *you*,' suggested Mr. Walcot, drily.

'Perhaps not; but he never tried his tricks on me; his mind, though malevolent, was judicious. I should probably have blown him up with gunpowder. As it was, it was lucky for him I had no quarrel with him on my own account. I remember meeting him in a London street after I had joined the Navy, and feeling the greatest inclination to pitch into him for his vile treatment of poor Archer; but he had his cheek muffled in a handkerchief, and looked so seedy that I left him alone. "Ah, Mr. Mayne," he said, pretending to be pleased to see me, "how are you?" Then thinking I was going to inquire after his health (which I wasn't) he continued, 'I'm unfortunately just going to the dentist's."'

'"I'm glad to hear it," said I, "and I hope it will be a double one."'

Gresham burst out laughing, and even Sir Robert smiled; but it was in a very grave voice that Mr. Walcot observed, 'Such conduct

in a very young man was, perhaps, excusable, but you will surely not now contend, Mr. Mayne, that it was right or kind.'

'My dear sir,' answered Mayne, 'I do not "contend" about the matter; few actions of mine have given me more entire satisfaction than that retort. He understood by it at once all that I had in my mind. If people were always "kind," as you term it, to the cruel and unjust, those persons would have it all their own way, and would never mend. It is our Christian duty to mend them.'

'That is a new reading of the New Testament indeed,' observed Mr. Walcot.

'Still, my dear Ferdinand,' observed Sir Robert, 'it must be remembered that Mr. Mayne was not avenging his own wrongs in expressing that somewhat ill-natured wish.'

'That is true; he has indicated, however, what he would have done to Mr. Horner, if he had given *him* annoyance; he would have blown him up with gunpowder.'

Logically Mr. Walcot had clearly the best

of it; but other elements besides logic go to form social opinion; and this observation, apparently so conclusive of Mr. Mayne's revengeful and truculent disposition, was received with a shout of laughter, in which the accused person joined as heartily as the rest. Almost for the first time that well-tempered and incisive weapon, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's tongue, had failed him. So far from being shocked at Mr. Frederic Mayne's opinions, it was clear that Sir Robert was rather pleased with him than otherwise. His hatred of tyranny, and sympathy with the oppressed, though manifested only in a schoolboy, had struck an answering chord within him.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE ARBOUR.

Reader, do you know what it is to live in the country all the livelong year? If not, never jeer at your country cousins, for you know not what they suffer. You go to the Lakes, perhaps, in the summer, or to the seaside in the autumn, and when winter comes you return to London and live snug. You have no conception, perhaps, except from pictures (which always fall short of the reality), of the melancholy events that take place in agricultural localities after what is called the fall of the leaf. In the first place the arrangements for lighting are very imperfect, so that you can only see your way about for a few hours; and in those, if you have no passion for destroying life with dog or gun, there

is very little to be done. The great object of the simple folks one meets seems to be to keep themselves warm; and when they can do it, which is not often, they are very pleased—'We are quite in a glow,' they say. This reminds one of a very early age of civilisation, when 'Ha, ha! I have seen the fire; I am warm,' was wont to be uttered in a voice of triumph. In the country, in the winter time, it is *always* wet under foot, either with damp or with snow, and it is generally wet over head. 'We are quite dry!' exclaim the inhabitants in the winter, when they are fortunate enough to return so from their melancholy walks.

It was not winter yet at Halcombe, but the state of things I have described was beginning. At 4 P.M. everybody was at home who could *get* home, and darkness reigned for the next sixteen hours. Under such circumstances even moderately agreeable guests in a country house are invaluable.

'Country hospitality' in winter is proverbial, and no wonder.

You may therefore imagine what a godsend was Mr. Frederic Mayne, who had a smile, or a story, or a sea-song for every one, just as they pleased. His spirits were inexhaustible, and were applied judiciously; milk (with a dash of rum in it) for babes, and milk punch (not too strong, but stiffish) for the grown males. He took Frankie under his special protection, perhaps because he reminded him of young Archer.

'You mope,' he said. 'You do not enjoy life as it is your duty to do. What's the matter?'

The tears were very near Frank's eyes; but he only said 'Nothing,' with a look over his shoulder which was not lost upon his interlocutor.

'Somebody has bullied this child,' thought he to himself. 'It must be'—(I am sorry to repeat such a word, but it was not uttered aloud, remember)—'it must be that brute Walcot.'

Mr. Mayne was apt to jump to conclusions,

and occasionally, as must needs happen, found firm ground.

'My dear Frank, you want bracing; you never seem to me to be doing anything.'

'What *can* a boy do?' said Frankie, despairingly.

'Well, that depends. I knew a boy—or, at least, I knew his son afterwards—who did this pretty thing. He was a poor boy, who worked on a pilot boat at Bambridge during our war with France. She was off the coast on the look-out for ships, when a French lugger privateer hove in sight, with twelve oars on each side. That was not the sort of ship the pilot boat was on the look-out for, and her crew got into their coble to row to land; but the boy James Wallis—a name it is worth while for any boy to remember—declined to go; he said he would 'take his chance,' only he gave them his watch and the few shillings he had to take to his brother. The Frenchman came up, lowered his maintopsail and lug sails, and tried

to grapple; but the boy put the helm down, and went about, though they fired at him with their small arms pretty handsomely. This little game compelled the Frenchman to make sail and tack, but Wallis—being very clever at it—tacked also, and weathered him. He was fired at continually at thirty yards' distance; but yet he contrived to repeat the manœuvre *eighteen times*, when a fresh breeze sprung up, and he showed them a clean pair of heels, and got safe to Bambridge. That's what a boy can do, my lad.'

Frank's cheeks were crimson with excitement, and his eyes glistened with pleasure.

'I wish I had been that boy, Mr. Mayne.'

'Quite right; so do I. He was as big a man as the other Wallace, though he was but sixteen. Well, we can all do something; only we must never be afraid; and we never need be so unless we have done something to be ashamed of.'

'Ah!' said Frankie, with a sigh that was almost a groan.

'Hullo! What have you done to be ashamed of?'

'Oh, nothing—at least——' and, driven into a corner, the child told his new friend, not about his little 'attempted murder' case, but about meeting the giant. 'Everybody thinks I have told a lie about it, Mr. Mayne, and yet it was all true.'

'Very good. I have seen several giants myself, though never one with six legs. When did it happen?'

And Frankie told him the exact date.

Later in the day, Mr. Mayne had a little private talk with Lady Arden; as it was private it cannot be repeated—indeed, the rapturous manner in which her ladyship took his hand, when it was over, could hardly be dwelt upon by a sober writer who has always the proprieties in his mind's eye.

'You have a kind heart, Mr. Mayne,' were the words with which that interview ended; 'and I am deeply obliged to you.'

Evelyn Nicoll was a puzzle to Mr. Mayne.

All women were so, more or less; he did not pretend to understand a sex which says 'No,' when it means 'Yes,' and can shed tears by a mere effort of the will. What was unknown to him, however, this modest young fellow always respected; and when in addition we take into account the claim to courtesy and honour that women have on every chivalrous nature, it may be imagined what a fool they had made of Mr. Frederic Mayne in his time. If he found a young person faithless—and it required the strongest evidence to convince him that such a thing could be—he sighed and bade her adieu by no means in anger, and at once transferred his allegiance and credulity elsewhere.

He had always some divinity in earthly shape whom he worshipped till he found out that her feet were of clay; but his last ideal had just gone off (in honourable marriage be it understood, though a wholly unworthy person) with a French marquis, and for the moment Mr. Mayne was without a beloved object. It

had struck him at first sight that if Evelyn Nicoll had not been bespoken by his friend she would have been the very one to be his own heart's queen; and though honour erased the thought as soon as formed, his devotion, in platonic shape, remained. It grieved him to see one so young and beautiful so silent and depressed. And, like a doctor who loves his calling for his own sake, despising fees and even 'the etiquette of the profession,' which at least requires one to be called in, he sought about for the cause of her calamity, in hopes to cure it. The result of his investigations, which were carried on without subtlety, though with infinite precaution, was most deplorable.

He was from his marine habits an early riser —for folks at sea, though there is nothing whatever to do upon it, rise with the albatross, or other bird that answers to the matutinal lark on land—and let us hope are as happy as the days are long. He got up at Halcombe before the housemaids, and was wont to unfasten the front door with his own hands, and wander about

the solitary grounds like a ghost who had broken his leave of absence and despised the summons of cock-crow. There was a curlew with one clipped wing in the garden whose friendship he cultivated extremely; and, after some conversation with him, he would climb the windy down and listen to the battle of the waves on the sea-shore. Then he would come back at an hour that was still early, and, if possible, administer 'cold pig,' or some other irritant, to his friend Gresham, to persuade him to get up and be in time for breakfast.

He was returning from the shore one morning, when the young lady we have spoken of who had risen half out of her grave, attracted his attention in the churchyard; and he stopped a moment, as well he might, to admire the simplicity of her demeanour. As he did so, certain sounds came to his ear, brought by the wind over the high wall, on the other side of which was the garden terrace: it was a conversation between two persons whose voices, though one of them was familiar enough to

him, he did not recognise, the reason of which was that the language the speaker used was German, a tongue with which he himself, however, was tolerably acquainted, thanks to repeated visits to the Continent.

'No, I am not happy, dear,' were the first words that reached his ear; 'but the reason is not what you ascribe it to. I am quite content to wait for you; if I should win you after all, I should think myself well repaid for waiting. But I do not like this life of duplicity. Every kindness of Lady Arden's cuts me to the heart.'

'Tut—tut! If one must hold a candle to the devil sometimes, how much more necessary it is in our case to keep him in the dark? My enemy—our enemy—suspects us as it is; and as for Evelyn, you know as well as I do——'

Here Mayne, who felt that he had heard more than enough, gave a loud hem, and there was a scuttling of feet, as if he had started fifty rabbits on dry leaves. Then very slowly, to give time for the couple to escape, and also

because his thoughts were grave and serious, he moved towards the door in the wall and opened it. The terrace was deserted, as he had foreseen, and showed no trace of its recent tenants; but he had little doubt that they had been George Gresham and Miss Hurt. As to the former, indeed, he was quite sure, as soon as he heard the word 'Evelyn' fall from his lips, and why should they have conversed in German had Gresham's companion been any other than the German governess? It was a great blow to Mayne, for he had a particular dislike to underhand tricks and ways, and he had hitherto imagined his friend to be equally frank; yet here he was making love to another woman under the very roof of his intended bride! It was no wonder that poor Evelyn was so quiet and silent; her woman's instinct had no doubt warned her that she had lost her lover's allegiance, though she might little suspect with whom he had played the traitor. For there was one thing, quite independent of the few passages of conversation that had met

his ear, which convinced Mayne that the matter was serious: that his friend was not merely amusing himself with a little flirtation, which, however reprehensible, might be condoned or pardoned. And this was the early hour of the morning. Mayne was quite sure, from what he knew of Gresham, that nothing short of the most serious entanglement of the affections could have persuaded his friend to get up so long before breakfast time.

One half of the terrace—the more remote one from the Hall—was bordered by a tall hedge of yew; the other was open to the view, and terminated in an arbour, walled with fircones, the favourite resort just now of the unhappy Frank, who preferred sitting there alone with a 'story book' to running the risk of meeting his late antagonist Jem Groad. It was obvious that the interview of the two young people had taken place in the hidden part of the terrace, and that they had 'gone off R. C.' (but without the necessity of a stage direction)—that is to say, by the way that led

to the stables—in order to escape observation. It was, therefore, without the least suspicion that he could be intruding on any one's privacy that Frederic Mayne took his way to the arbour, in order to sit down there over a pipe, to meditate upon what course of action he should pursue in the circumstances which had been thus brought under his notice. From one point of view, of course, it was not his business; but, on the other hand, he felt strongly tempted to give his friend a 'piece of his mind,' not so much perhaps as regarded his little indiscretion with the governess, as his infidelity to Evelyn. He thought that young lady's case excessively hard.

As he passed by the half-closed door he heard—well, it was not a sneeze such as men sneeze: a violent ebullition of frenzied sound, which shakes the sneezer all about him—but a delicate 'tishaw,' a very duodecimo of a sneeze, and even that cut short as it were by a certain sharp compulsion. It was to the observing ear the sneeze of a lady who was extremely anxious

not to sneeze. Perhaps it was the pungency of the fir-cones, perhaps it was the misty atmosphere that hangs about all arbours; but, whatever it was she couldn't help it. Any other sound coming from any arbour at that hour—for no one patronises these retreats till the sun has rendered them attractive—Mayne would have put down to beast or bird; but a sneeze, and especially a 'tishaw' (which only an Italian greyhound can imitate, and there were none such at Halcombe), is eminently human. Some people in Mayne's position would have passed on, and pretended not to hear it; but, we venture to think, very few people.

There are doubtless some Sir Peter Teazles in the world who would have resisted the temptation to see what the pretty milliner was like who was behind the screen; but, as the song says, 'That's not you nor me.' The majority even of male mortals have some curiosity; and in Mayne's case was it not his duty if Miss Elise Hurt had taken refuge in that arbour to address to her a few words of

remonstrance respecting her 'goings on' with Mr. George Gresham. Perhaps she did not quite understand that he was an engaged man. At all events he felt he *must* know who the lady was. He was quite certain that he was not intruding upon a loving pair—unless, indeed, there were two pairs of turtle doves on the terrace that morning, which was unlikely, because he had heard the male bird take flight in the opposite direction—indeed he had thought both had gone that way, but it now seemed that he was mistaken: one had fled towards the stables, the other into the arbour. As there was no egress from the latter place except on to the gravel walk before him, he felt secure of the fugitive, and actually stopped to light his pipe. Under the veil of tobacco he could enter the arbour without suggesting to the fair being within that he had heard that 'tishaw;' he had come to smoke, and nothing (he made up his mind) was more likely to astonish him than to find Miss Elise Hurt there. As he pushed open the half-closed door, he

heard something retreating before him with a sweeping sound never yet made by man. Then a pair of black eyes flashed upon him in the semi-darkness, and a gentle voice in accents of alarm inquired, 'Who is it?'

'It is I, madam, Frederic Mayne.'

If his accents were not those of alarm, they were pregnant with surprise; he had meant to imitate astonishment at the discovery of the German governess, but he was very genuinely astonished at discovering another young person altogether. She had a diminutive, but very graceful shape; a face of considerable beauty and full of expression—just now it wore the timidity of bashful terror, and a voice, as we have hinted, exquisitely tender. There was a strange contrast, moreover, between the colour of her eyes and of her hair—the former being black as jet, and the latter a light brown—which marred her beauty, and produced an almost grotesque effect; and then she wore a dress of some bright green material exacerbated by cherry-coloured trimmings. It was not

Cinderella in her kitchen dress, but Cinderella in her Sunday best, when her cousin, the Lifeguardsman, came to court her. No lady, however poor, could willingly have put on such an attire.

'I am very sorry,' said she; 'I am afraid I have no business here. You won't say that you found me here, will you, sir?'

'Well, really—no, of course, I won't if you don't wish it. But who are you?'

'I am the young ladies' maid, sir, and, thinking no one belonging to the family would be about so early, I thought I would have a walk in the garden. And finding this bootiful arbour, I just sat down in it.'

'But it strikes me as very damp and cold,' remonstrated Mr. Mayne.

'Yes, sir, but then I dote on arbours. To have tea in an arbour—oh, Lor'!——'

This was not an exclamation of delight; it was one of horror, which immediately communicated itself to Mr. Frederic Mayne, for it was caused by the sound of approaching foot-

steps. To be found in the arbour with the young ladies' maid of the house where one is staying is a position from which the mind of man—even the *mens conscia recti*—shudders to contemplate.

In one stride Mr. Mayne gained the gravel walk; and in his next, which he took mechanically, he almost fell into the arms of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER BIRD CAUGHT.

'You are an early riser, Mr. Mayne,' was Mr. Walcot's grave salutation.

'Yes,' stammered the other, 'I am.'

If his own reputation only had been at stake he would have felt only a slight embarrassment; he would certainly not have stooped to concealment; but his chivalric nature led him astray for once—as chivalric natures sometimes do. He shrank from discovery, for the sake of the young ladies' maid, and wished to shield her, if he could. It was certain, by Mr. Walcot's face, that he suspected nothing.

'I like my pipe before breakfast,' continued Mr. Mayne, leading the way on to the terrace,

and intending to get his companion behind the yew-tree wall, that the young person in green and red might make her escape; 'and I love the morning air.'

'And you find it freshest in the arbour, do you?' inquired Mr. Walcot.

The observation was a somewhat contemptuous one; but Mr. Mayne didn't mind that, if he could only get the man away; and he was coming, thank goodness! though at a very deliberate pace.

'Well; I had been walking a good deal—one's old quarter-deck habits, you know—and felt a little tired; so I sat down—— What a lovely garden you have here! even at this late time of the year, when the cold and damp——'

He might have said 'induces sneezing'; for at that moment the 'tishaw, tishaw!' broke forth from the arbour behind them. Mr. Frederic Mayne turned scarlet.

'It seems you had a companion in your solitude,' observed Mr. Walcot, drily.

'No, indeed, I hadn't—at least—I do assure

you, upon my honour, this was exactly how it happened: I heard that very sneeze from that very place; and curiosity induced me to open the door.'

'And take a seat?' observed Mr. Walcot, with the air of one who supplies an hiatus in a narrative.

'Did I say I took a seat? If so, it was an exaggeration; the young woman herself will bear me witness that I was not in her company more than a minute.'

'Time flies when we are happily employed,' remarked Mr. Walcot, sententiously. 'But if I may ask the question—and I think I am justified in so doing, as an intimate friend of Sir Robert Arden and his family—who *was* the "young woman," as you call her? Of course, I can see her for myself—but——'

'Upon my word and honour, Mr. Walcot, I don't know who she is!' interrupted the other, earnestly. 'I never set eyes on her, except within the last five minutes; but I believe—I entreat you not to speak about it, for her sake;

though she was no more to blame than I am——'

'Very likely,' put in Mr. Walcot, drily; 'still there was blame somewhere, as you admit.'

'No, I don't. I only admit that the circumstances are embarrassing—nay, if you will have it so, suspicious. You are taking an honourable course in letting the poor girl make her escape, for of course she would be overwhelmed with confusion; but the whole affair was the result of the purest accident.'

Poor Mr. Mayne had never felt such a fool before, and at the same time suffered such humiliation. To have to ask a favour of this man, whom he disliked, was most distressing to him; but to get an innocent girl into trouble was still more abhorrent to his feelings.

'The purest accident,' observed Mr. Walcot, quietly, 'is an expression of some significance, for though there are many accidents, there are few pure ones. You have not yet favoured me with the information as to who the "poor girl" is.'

'I tell you I don't know,' answered Mayne, with irritation. 'I only know she is the maid to the young ladies.'

'Oh, indeed!'

Never were two words uttered with greater stress and point.

'Of course I feel the full absurdity of my position; but, once more, I give you my honour as a gentleman that the girl is not to blame.'

'In cases of this kind, Mr. Mayne, a man's honour—at least some great authorities have said so—is bound at all hazards to defend the lady.'

'You do not believe my word, then?'

'Tush, tush, sir! These matters are made no better by a quarrel. I think it hardly consistent with my duty to be silent on this matter; it is not the first time that you have left this house at untimely hours—nay, I impute nothing, but merely state how it strikes a disinterested mind. Your "quarter-deck habits" may, as you say, induce morning walks, but landsmen have no very high opinion of them. How-

ever, Sir Robert Arden's health is in such an unsatisfactory state that I shall tell him nothing of this at present. I do not pledge myself to perpetual silence on the matter, but shall be guided by circumstances—Good morning, sir.' With these words Mr. Walcot opened the door in the wall that led into the stable yard, closed it sharply behind him, and even slid the bolt to prevent his late companion following him.

No insult could be more complete, and yet there was nothing for it but to bear it. No bird was ever more completely in the toils of the Halcombe fowler than was Mr. Frederic Mayne.

His first impulse was to go straight to Lady Arden, and explain the circumstances of the case; but the very best that could happen to him would, he felt, be an overwhelming storm of ridicule, which would not even be confined to the members of the family, but would extend to the servants' hall. On the other hand, if Walcot should keep his word, and be silent for the time, every moment would be of advantage

to him (Frederic Mayne), for slander stale is feeble compared with slander fresh; and in this case might well be ascribed to personal animosity. His proper course would naturally have been to confide in Gresham; but he shrank from this because just now he felt by no means so friendly towards him as of yore, by reason of his treachery to Evelyn. Moreover, he was by no means sure but that the object of Gresham's tender affections on the terrace had been the very cause of his own calamitous condition; namely, the young ladies' maid herself. It was true he had overheard the happy pair (whoever they were) speaking in the German tongue, and therefore his suspicions had at once attached themselves to the governess. But, if it were she to whom Gresham had been paying court, how came the young ladies' maid in the arbour, within a few yards of the lovers? His head seemed to go round and round as he sought to unravel these mysteries, and he decided, at all events, to do nothing until he could consider the whole matter more calmly.

In the mean time Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was revolving in his mind, on the other side of the wall, what steps, if any, *he* should take in the affair, which (however much it might have shocked him on moral grounds) had certainly happened most advantageously to his own interests. He had got Mr. Frederic Mayne upon the hip; and whether he should give him the *coup de grâce*—that is to say his *congé*—upon the spot, or not, was what occupied his thoughts. That he could do it, he was quite certain—and we may as well say at once that he had very good reasons for his confidence; but would it not be more judicious to let him be for the present? To have Mr. Mayne at the Hall in an independent state, as the friend of his foe, and with an evidently hostile disposition to himself, was a very different thing to having him there, as would now be the case, under his thumb. Frank, Evelyn, Gresham, Mayne, were all more or less in his power, or had at all events good reason to stand in fear of him, and this was a situation which the master of it

greatly appreciated. Mr. Walcot regarded them much as a first-rate whip regards his four-in-hand; he enjoyed driving them none the less that some of the steeds were spirited and ready to kick over the traces. His safest plan would without doubt have been to get rid of the one that had last been broken in—if he could be said to be broken in—but there were advantages to be gained by retaining him for the present, independent of the pleasure of making him feel the curb.

The stable yard opened into the back premises of the house, and those again, as we have said, on to the rose garden in front of Sir Robert's study. It was thither Mr. Walcot was bound, and during the small space of time it took him to traverse this space he decided upon the course to be adopted. His mind was eminently practical—which generally means a mind absolutely free from imagination; there was not only no wavering in its resolves, but no wandering from the point—none of those digressions in which even the most logical are

prone to indulge. There was no ‘ shilly shally,’ ‘ willy nilly,’ about it. These short and sharp decisions save Time, which is money, which is everything. Occasionally, however (which is fortunate for the rest of the world) the practical mind decides wrongly.

CHAPTER IV.

TO THE TOP OF HIS BENT.

We have said that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was rapid in his thoughts and actions; his movements, too, had all the quickness of a cat, and its gait. He had not slammed that garden door in Mr. Mayne's face—he was quite incapable of such an action; he had only closed it suddenly and very softly, and then slid in the bolt. When he had thus secured himself, no triumph lit up his intelligent countenance more than shines upon the engine-driver's who has just shunted a cattle-truck on to a siding. His face, on the contrary, became immediately more grave and thoughtful than it had been while he was conversing with his late companion, and especially it lost its cynical expression.

By the time he had reached the door that opened on the rose garden his features had assumed a certain sympathetic air which well became them. He opened and closed this door with the caution of an Eastern slave, and his feet fell on the shaven lawn, on which he now found himself, without a sound. They led him thus to the window of Sir Robert's study, where he stood awhile in silence as if awaiting some summons from within, which was not, however, forthcoming. He could see the tenant of the apartment seated at his desk, with his head leaning on his hands; his eyes were fixed upon some white object close before them, apparently a letter, by which his attention was entirely absorbed.

At a light touch of Walcot's finger on the window-pane, however, Sir Robert started up. At first his face expressed amazement—nay, apprehension; but on recognising his visitor it at once assumed an air of satisfaction He hurried quickly to the glass door which opened on the rose garden, and admitted him.

'I am glad you are come, Ferdinand. I would have sent to you to fetch you, but that I shrank from employing vulgar hands, even as accessories. I—— Such a manifestation has been vouchsafed me!'

'What—have you seen anything?'

'No—at least I have not seen my darling; but I have had word from her.'

'Indeed. She has spoken to you, then?'

'No, not so. Look at this, Ferdinand.'

He held tightly in his trembling hand, as though it were something too precious to extend to another, a slip of paper, with a word or two of writing on it. 'See, read it.'

Walcot read the inscription, which consisted of but three words, 'I am here.'

'Well, well,' cried the other impatiently; 'do you recognise it?' His pale face was flushed, his eyes shone with eager fire.

'I see, of course, that it is Madeline's handwriting—or an imitation of it.'

'Ah! That was just what I thought to myself as soon as I could think of anything save

the communication itself,' returned Sir Robert, with a strange look of triumph; '"My cautious Ferdinand," said I, "will be sure to say 'an imitation.'"'

'Of course I was,' returned the other, quietly. 'It is an idea that must have occurred to anybody. If I had my doubts about your really hearing Madeline's voice the other night—although I grant you have convinced me of that—how much more should I doubt such evidence as this? Three little words—a mere tyro with his fingers who had ever seen a scrap of her handwriting could cheat the eye so far.'

'He would not cheat *my* eyes,' answered Sir Robert, gravely; 'but no matter. Listen. My darling Madeline and I never had so much as one word of disagreement throughout our married life. We talked of this one day, and I said it was a thing impossible to last; it must needs be that we should sometimes differ. "We may differ, darling," was her reply, "but there will be no words. I shall simply let you know that I am

cross." (Think of my Madeline being cross!) Accordingly, when she was opposed to any view of mine, which happened once or twice only, and always upon some trivial matter, she would playfully write her name on a slip of paper, with a certain sign upon it, and place it on my desk, where I found *this*.'

'And what was the sign?' inquired Walcot, smiling.

'In the corner of the paper was an X. It signified "Madeline is *cross*." Now, in order to put her communication out of the possibility of doubt as to its genuineness, she has made that private sign in this case.'

'I see,' said Walcot, examining the paper with scrupulous care, and speaking very gravely.

'You have no doubts now, Ferdinand?'

'No; I have no doubts.'

'What then? Your brow is clouded; is there anything in this that augurs ill?'

'Nothing more than what is expressed. I don't understand your logic, Arden. Why should Madeline seek to prove her own identity?

It seems to me that she has simply expressed displeasure.'

'Great Heaven, I never thought of that! My Madeline displeased with me! Oh, this is terrible! What word, or thought, or deed of mine can have vexed her?'

Mr. Walcot shrugged his shoulders.

'My dear Arden, my best services, as you know, are always at your disposal; but I am not omnipotent nor omniscient. The question you ask me is one which only yourself can answer.'

'I can *not*, Ferdinand. My mind is unconscious of offence. If I had doubted of her presence, of her living interest in me, of her continued love—but I never did, from the first moment that she reached her sweet hand down from Heaven to comfort me. It was *you* who doubted.'

'I know it, I grant it,' answered Walcot, coldly. 'It was my duty—on your account—to doubt, while doubt was possible.'

'Then what is she vexed about with *me*?'

exclaimed Sir Robert, vehemently. 'What lightest thought of mine has wronged her?'

'It can be no light thing that causes one of the immortals to express displeasure,' answered Walcot, gravely. 'Look into your own heart, Arden; it is not for man to read it, though it seems *she* has done so.'

'Ah, I have it!' cried Sir Robert; 'it is my will! That is the only thing of any importance in which I have been of late engaged. She must be dissatisfied with the conditions of my will.'

'I should say "Impossible,"' said Walcot, thoughtfully, 'except that such manifestations as these have nought to do with possibilities. It is, at all events, to the last degree unlikely. Why should one so pure and self-forgetful, even when in the flesh, take, as a spirit, any heed of such gross matters? No, it cannot be. Yet, as you say, she is displeased.'

It was not Sir Robert who had said so; but as that gentleman was convinced that such was the case, it was immaterial. It was a habit of

Mr. Walcot's, doubtless induced by modesty, to attribute his own sagacious suggestions to others, and especially in the case of his brother-in-law.

'She is not solicitous on her own account, of course,' said Sir Robert, musing; 'it can matter to her nothing personally as to how I dispose of my property. Still she may be thinking of one dear and near to her—and yet I did not forget you, Ferdinand,' he added, plaintively.

'I beg, Arden, that you will not allude to such a subject,' replied Mr. Walcot, with some trace of irritation. 'In the first place, even putting the matter on its lowest grounds, it can never concern me as your legatee, for I am persuaded you will long outlive me; and, secondly, I do not choose to pry and peer into such intentions as you speak of. Even by the conventions of the world, it is agreed that they should be of a private nature; and, to my mind, any reference to them is most painful.'

'But why refuse me your assistance, your advice, Ferdinand?' answered the other, imploringly.

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'Because I have none to give you. You will act, of course—if I know you—as your conscience dictates. You will not, I am sure, be swayed in such a matter by vulgar considerations—or associations—of any kind.'

'By associations do you mean the relations which I have formed by my second marriage; as apart from George, for instance?'

'I must really decline to answer that question, Arden; I cannot venture to indicate your duty in a matter so delicate. Your own feelings are the best guide.'

'Of that I am somewhat doubtful, Ferdinand; it is just there that I do not feel sure of myself, that I require a helping hand. If Madeline is vexed with what I have done, will she not point out what is amiss, think you? Or even may she not be mistaken? and, in that case, how am I to set myself right with her?'

Mr. Walcot shook his head. 'These immortal beings are not subject to error, Arden, like us poor creatures.'

'But it is intolerable to picture my darling

as displeased with me. How can I tell her that I am unconscious of offence? that I am eager, above all things, to obey her wishes? If I write to her as she has done to me——'

Again Mr. Walcot shook his head.

'The spirits of the departed cannot be communicated with through such material means; but they occasionally vouchsafe their visible presence to those who sincerely and reverentially desire it. I do not know whether that is your case.'

'Nor do I know myself, Ferdinand. There was a time—quite lately—when I thought I could not have borne to look upon her. But now—now that I have seen her handwriting, as well as heard her voice—what was once too awful has grown more familiar. Can mere desire on my part, think you, bring about this miracle?'

'I am not sure.'

'But are there no means by which our volition can be supplemented? It is written that wicked spirits could be so compelled by

spells and charms; may not good ones by some act of love and faith be similarly attracted earthward?'

'Hush! speak not of compulsion. You may even now be wounding ears of which you little guess. There *are* means such as you speak of; but whether they may prove efficacious or not, does not rest with me.'

'What are they?' inquired Sir Robert, in a hushed and awe-struck tone. 'Tell me, Ferdinand; I entreat you tell me.'

'They are various, my dear friend, and vary with the circumstances. I can only say that in respect to one of them you are favourably situated, since you are in possession of that piece of paper.'

'How so?' inquired the other, so breathless with excitement that his words were scarcely audible.

'Thus: if you hold in your hand a scrap of handwriting of the spirit you wish to see—provided it contains his or her autograph—and call her by her name three times at midnight,

it is said—for I have no personal knowledge of the matter—that she will appear before you.'

'She will appear before me?' repeated Sir Robert, softly.

'I do not guarantee it, of course,' observed Walcot, gravely 'I may even have been indiscreet in saying this; do not blame me if I arouse false hopes. You have compelled me.

'I understand, my friend, and shall in no case blame you,' answered Sir Robert. 'You have laid me under one obligation the more, Ferdinand—that is all.'

'I am not aware of that, Arden,' returned the other, earnestly; 'I almost regret that I was not more reticent. You are neither strong nor well, and, as it is, the strain upon your spiritual nature is telling upon you. I fear, supposing that this privilege is granted to you, that the sudden shock—though it may have nought but bliss in it—may do you a mischief.'

'What! My Madeline do me a mischief?

No, Ferdinand. It is true my health has suffered of late. I know what you would prescribe—"Travel; a complete change;" and perhaps I may some day take your advice. But at present I can think of nothing—nothing but my lost darling. I have thanked Heaven before now that I had more concern with the dead than with the living—by which I meant communion only: the echo of thought to thought. But now, if I indeed should see her —— Oh! Ferdinand, the thought unmans me quite.'

'Because, as I say again, you are not yourself, Arden. How often have you and I—speaking of man's last hours, when he stands upon the verge of spirit life—agreed that his utterances are valueless; that he is physically too prostrated to bear a sound mind within him? And is not *your* case—ailing and nerve-stricken, yet standing, perchance, on the brink of some supreme revelation—a parallel one? Can you honestly say that you feel equal to such an occasion? Is your logical faculty fit

to grapple with what may, indeed, be great spiritual truths, but may also be delusions?'

'Delusions!' exclaimed Sir Robert. 'You have yourself acknowledged that every possibility of delusion has been eliminated. No; it is possible I may be fated to be tried beyond my strength. But what alternative is offered to me? Can I leave Halcombe—a spot become sacred to me, since my lost Madeline has deigned to visit it—without affording the opportunity which, perchance, she seeks of holding speech with me?'

'Well, well, perhaps you are right, Arden,' returned the other, slowly. 'But at least do not give yourself up a prey to morbid hopes—hopes which nine men out of ten, we know, would designate as those of a madman. I have given you the same advice before, yet I am constrained to repeat it. Play the man, my friend; and, above all, be yourself in your associations with those about you. There are strangers coming here to-day, in whose presence, I conjure you, to show no weakness; and with

respect to your own belongings, this is still more to be deprecated. Let no one in this house be able to say that Sir Robert Arden was the prey to nervous terrors, before (as is possible) he was called to witness to the truth; before he had the experience of that so-called spiritual manifestation which was, in fact (they will rejoice to say so), the creation of a disordered mind and an enfeebled body. This is not a mere private matter, my friend, affecting your own interests only, however vitally; enormous issues may hang upon it. To you—who knows?—the very "Key of all the Creeds"—the dread Secret of the Ages—may be entrusted.'

Sir Robert shook his head.

'I have no ambition for such greatness, Ferdinand,' he murmured; 'I only wish to see my Madeline. Still, you give me good advice, no doubt. I cannot forget her; no: but, while with others, I will strive to remember other matters.'

'Good; there is the breakfast bell. Let us go in.'

CHAPTER V.

A COURT-MARTIAL STORY.

It was not without some anxiety—such as, unhappily, even the innocent often experience in this world—that Frederic Mayne sat down to the morning meal after that misadventure in the arbour; he knew that, though Ferdinand Walcot could wear a mask to conceal his feelings, Sir Robert was incapable of such deception, and his courteous and hospitable greeting at once informed him that no 'leprous distilment' of prejudice or scandal had, for the present at least, been dropped into his ear.

Knowing, however, or fancying that he knew, the nature of the man with whom he had to deal, he was by no means set at ease, and, like any other threatened man, felt much in

need of 'counsel's opinion.' For Gresham's advice he was debarred from applying, because of the secret he had discovered concerning him, and his knowledge of which a feeling of delicacy (not unmingled with resentment) prevented him from revealing; a natural shrinking from making unpleasantness in the house prevented him from making a clean breast of it to his host; and in this perplexity he resolved to confide in a third, and comparatively disinterested, party.

From the first, Mayne had greatly taken to the Rev. John Dyneley; there was a frankness about him that appealed strongly to his own open nature, and a modesty in regard to self-assertion which he admired none the less that he was conscious that he did not share the possession of that virtue. His opinion of Dyneley, had he been asked to express it, would have been 'a right good fellow, and, though a parson, with no nonsense about him.'

Moreover, confidential relations had been already established between them on a certain

matter soon to be made public, so that he felt less of embarrassment than he would otherwise have done in consulting him on a subject so delicate as his adventure of the morning; lastly, although Dyneley had been becomingly reticent as to the members of the Halcombe family, Mr. Mayne had a suspicion that he entertained no very high opinion of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.

Mr. Raynes and his wife—from whose house Frank had been returning home when he encountered that incredible giant—were coming to spend the day at the Hall, and little preparations were going on in consequence which afforded Mayne an opportunity of slipping unobserved away from the house, and paying a visit to the Manor Farm. He found the Curate with his foot in the stirrup, on the point of setting out for Archester on his grey mare—the only luxury which he allowed himself.

'I was just off,' he said, 'on my expedition of discovery; for to-day is the day to tell our tale—if, unlike the Needy Knifegrinder, we have one to tell.'

'Quite right; I had forgotten for the moment because of an occurrence which has just happened that concerns myself more nearly. That is only human nature.'

'It is very human,' answered the Curate, smiling, 'which you must allow rather corroborates my theory.'

These two had had some friendly arguments —not, indeed, of the high philosophic kind, 'of Fate, Freewill, Foreknowledge absolute,' but of a quasi-theological sort—in which they had very wisely agreed to differ.

'I will acknowledge an error in logic, Mr. Dyneley, if you on your part will give me your advice upon a matter, in which I have committed no error, but the consequences of which may be serious to me. In the first place, however, I must ask you to believe that, if I am not so orthodox as could be wished, I am incapable of what is unbecoming a gentleman.'

'I do not claim to be a great judge of character,' answered the Curate; 'but you may certainly take that much for granted.'

'Thank you, Dyneley. Then this is my story;' and thereupon he told him, without any reference to Gresham, how he had been led by a sneeze to enter the arbour, and had been found there, under ridiculous but somewhat embarrassing circumstances, by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.

'That the man means to do me a mischief,' he concluded, 'if the opportunity should occur, I feel certain, though for the present he keeps his mouth shut.'

'I cannot conceive,' observed the Curate, thoughtfully, 'how this young woman—her name is Annabel Spence—came to be in the arbour at all, and especially at such an hour in the morning. You have no theory, I suppose, to account for her presence there?'

Mr. Mayne had a theory to account for it, as we know; but he did not feel justified in saying anything that might implicate Gresham, so he shook his head.

'I have never seen the girl but once,' continued the Curate, 'but I have learnt from the

young ladies that she is very peculiar; she does not mix with her fellow-servants, and is very reticent about herself.'

'Is she educated above her class, do you know?' inquired Mayne.

'Yes; I believe so.'

'I thought that from her manner,' replied Mayne, carelessly. He did not dare ask, what he most wanted to know, whether she could speak German.

'You ask me for advice in this matter, Mr. Mayne,' said the Curate, 'and I need not say my best services are at your disposal; but upon my word I have no action to propose. To take the initiative is dangerous, in such a case; you know the proverb, "*Qui s'excuse s'accuse;*" and since you are not only innocent of offence, but there is no accusation to the contrary, I should recommend——'

'A masterly inaction,' put in Mayne, laughing. 'Very good. I feel, however, that I have done right in consulting you, so that in case any imputation—"frivolous and vexatious,"

as the courts-martial call it—is made against me at any time, perhaps, in my absence, you will be in possession of the actual circumstances. In my opinion, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot is capable of anything.'

'Because he shut the garden door in your face?' said the Curate, smiling.

'Oh, no; though, mind you, that was not a pleasant trait in him. He would not have dared to do it but that he felt I could not make a row about it. Gresham knows him down to his boots, and calls him all sorts of names; well-deserved ones, I have no doubt. To my eyes, in his influence over Sir Robert, and in his general goings on in the family, he resembles Tartuffe.'

'You think him a hypocrite, then?'

'Certainly; that to begin with. It is what his hypocrisy conceals, however, that one most objects to, of course.'

'And what is that?'

'Heartlessness; nay, worse—cruelty; male-

volence; greed—— But I fear I am shocking you.'

'It is certainly painful to me,' said the Curate, slowly, 'to learn that you have so bad an opinion of the man that Sir Robert—whom we all love and respect—delights to honour. I will confess to you at once that Mr. Walcot is not a personal favourite of mine; but such imputations——'

'My dear Mr. Dyneley, I impute nothing,' put in the other, laughing; 'I only give you my own opinion of the gentleman; he may be the kindest and most disinterested creature upon earth—only if he is, I'll eat him. I am detaining you, however, from your errand.'

'Not at all. I am glad to have seen you,' said the Curate, though his tones were far from glad. He seemed unable to rouse himself from some unpleasant reflections. 'I shall be back by luncheon time,' he added, as he mounted his horse; 'and I hope with some good news. Good morning.'

And the two young men shook hands with much cordiality.

In less than an hour after they had parted, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was in possession of the fact of their interview, which seemed to have some significance for him, to judge by the manner in which he received it from the lips of Gilbert Holm.

'He comes to the Curate, does he, instead of his friend Gresham, to repose this confidence?' was the muttered reflection. 'Now why is that, I wonder?' He paced for some minutes the little garden before the farmhouse ere he thought this out, and even then his furrowed brow, in place of becoming clearer, grew dark as night. 'So, so, he loves her, this salt-water fool, and believes Gresham his rival; that has sundered friendship. So much the better; when the faggot is unbound the sticks are snapped the easier.'

As a matter of fact, however, Walcot saw some cause for disquiet in the fact of this intimacy between Frederic Mayne and the Curate,

both of whom, as he well knew, were hostile to him; but, like other men of strong will and self-dependent habits, he never admitted, even to himself, that matters were going against him.

In the country, persons of both sexes are often found of their own free will to drive ten miles and back to a dinner party; the motive (for the mere attractions of the banquet can never account for it) is gregariousness. Their own company and that of their family has become intolerable, and they put themselves to this enormous inconvenience, as Sir John Plumpudding hung himself one morning, 'for a change.' At the same time they are not unaware of the discomforts they thus incur; the little outbreaks of temper on the road out, from hunger or other causes, the exhaustion on their return journey, and the snatch of sleep rudely broken by the jolt at their own hall steps. Therefore, neighbourly folks in the country often ask their friends to spend what (with some secret doubt, perhaps, of having much

means of amusement at command) they call 'a long day' with them. Mr. and Mrs. Raynes had received an invitation of this kind from Lady Arden. Perhaps it had not been given altogether with the philanthropic motives I have hinted at. The fact is, her ladyship was very particular as to the social proprieties, and the guests in question were not quite in a position to be asked to meet the county families at dinner. Nobody knew where Mr. and Mrs. Raynes had sprung from: they had taken the only gentleman's residence there was upon Mirton Moor, about ten years ago, which in the eyes of county society is but the lifespan of a mushroom; and though they had wonderfully adapted themselves, as it were, to the soil—Mr. Raynes was, on the one hand, very popular as an employer of labour, and, on the other, was the Rector's churchwarden at Mirton—still there was something about them that the drawing-room folks of those parts described as 'peculiar.' The gentleman quoted Shakespeare; but was quite ignorant of the usual topics of general

conversation, to which he listened with a good-natured face, that was occasionally convulsed by the most comic of grins. The boys and girls were enchanted with this peculiarity; but their elders disapproved of it, and one of them had even contemptuously nick-named him the Cheshire Cat.

His lady spoke still more seldom; but she had a beaming face which gave every one who talked to her the impression that she was entranced by their conversation, unless they happened to cross-examine her about it, when to their chagrin they found she had not understood one word of it. Of her genuine kindness of heart, however, there was no doubt; and the manner in which, though forty-seven and fat, she tripped in the children's dance always given at The Lilacs at Christmas, would alone have guaranteed it. 'Hung upon wires' was, indeed, an observation that had been applied to her mode of progression at all times, which, in connection with Mr. R.'s contortions of countenance, had caused this honest pair

to be known among their intimates as 'the Marionettes.'

They were, nevertheless, of the most genuine flesh and blood, and were warmly appreciated by those who had any sense of proportion, and could forget eccentricities of conduct and appearance in the presence of real worth—among whom, I need not say, was Sir Robert Arden.

His greeting to them on the present occasion was only less warm than that of Frank, who had been always welcome to The Lilacs, and whose greatest 'chum' was their son and heir, Master Richard Raynes, at present at a boarding-school at Cheltenham. It was to that school that his own hopes had turned, as an escape from the vengeance of John Groad and Son, before they were nipped in the bud by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's veto.

The luncheon party was a large one, the Great Baba having, at Mrs. Raynes's request, who doated on babies, honoured it by his august presence, and the Curate being also among the

invited, though he did not join the company till they had sat down. At first the conversation, led, of course, by His Serene Diminutiveness, to whom every one listened as to a pocket oracle, turned upon the approaching Fifth of November, on which certain fireworks were to be displayed, and was, therefore, of an historical character.

The Great Baba would have it that Guy Fawkes (to whom he felt he would be somehow indebted for the entertainment in question) was by no means censurable—a position from which the arguments of the whole strength of the company failed to dislodge him. Even when convinced of the heinousness of his attempt to blow up his Sovereign with gunpowder, he hazarded the idea, 'But perhaps he was a nasty King,'—which was incontrovertible.

At the moment of his triumph the Curate entered.

'This is unlike you, Dyneley,' remonstrated Sir Robert, with his usual stickling for punctuality.

'And unlike the Church,' added Gresham; 'his reverence did not know that there were oyster patties.'

'I have been over to Archester,' said the Curate, simply; 'and, as it has turned out, on a very pleasant errand.'

'I did not know she lived at Archester,' observed George, with an involuntary glance at Elise.

But the Curate took no notice of this ribald behaviour.

'I am glad that you are all together,' he said, gravely; 'and especially that Mr. and Mrs. Raynes are with you, because it is my pleasant duty to clear the character of a certain young gentleman—dear to all of us, and especially to you, Lady Arden—which has suffered under an unjust suspicion.'

Here Lady Arden's eyes began to glisten and her face to glow with pleasure; for she (and one other present) alone knew what was coming.

'You remember, Sir Robert, that a certain

tale of Master Frank's about his having met a giant with six legs, on his return home from The Lilacs one evening, a year or so ago, was much discredited. Now I am in a position to prove that he was really favoured with that spectacle.'

Mr. Walcot looked at his brother-in-law, and smiled an incredulous smile.

'My dear Dyneley,' said Sir Robert, reprovingly, 'is it not better to let bygones be bygones, than to attempt to reconcile impossibilities with truth?'

'I did see that giant,' said Frank, vehemently; 'and he had six legs, just as I told you all.'

'It is quite true,' continued the Curate; 'although it would probably never have been found out but for Mr. Mayne here.'

Every one turned to the person thus indicated. It surprised them that the key to this household problem should be discovered by a comparative stranger.

'Nay, no praise is due to me,' said Mayne; 'only when I was told of Master Frank's

strange experience, I thought it worth while to inquire if a giant—whether with six legs or two—had been in these parts at all, at the time in question. From an investigation in the old files of the county newspaper in your library, Sir Robert, I found that this was the case. A caravan, with a giant in it, was located at Mirton at the date of this alleged occurrence. He was, no doubt, the monster that Frank saw.'

'I don't quite see the *sequitur*,' observed Mr. Walcot, drily.

'I shall, however, have the pleasure of showing it to you,' replied the Curate, with some curtness. 'Armed with the information obtained from Mr. Mayne, I rode over to Mirton this morning, and made inquiries respecting this giant's habits. It was his custom it seems —in order doubtless that he should not be seen for nothing—to take his exercise after dark; and being, like most caravan giants, very weak in the legs, two men accompanied him to serve as supports, when necessary, on either side of

him. It was thus no doubt that Frank fell in with him; and in the twilight, it was natural enough that the four legs of his companions should have seemed to the boy to belong to this Goliath as well as his own two; while his head so far overtopped the others (which, indeed, were mere props under his arms) that they escaped observation altogether.'

'I like that tory,' exclaimed the Great Baba, drumming on the table with his silver fork and spoon with great enthusiasm; 'now tell Baba another about another giant, Dyney.'

But, for once in his life, an observation of the little household god passed unheeded. Everybody was crying out, 'Good boy, Frankie,' and expressing their pleasure that his innocence of the imputed falsehood had been thus established.

'I told you the other day, my lad,' said Mayne,

> That ever the right comes uppermost,
> And ever is justice done.

And here, you see, is an example of it.'

Frank said 'Thank you,' gratefully, and, as soon as he could escape from the embraces of his family, took Mr. Mayne's outstretched hand; but still he looked far otherwise than one who is enjoying a moral triumph. That notion of justice being always done to people chilled his blood. Moreover, he felt that Mr. Walcot's eye was piercing him like a brad-awl.

Even when his step-father beckoned to him and gave him a kind caress, his pale thin face wore as much pain as pleasure.

'I am afraid you have not quite forgiven us all,' said Sir Robert, 'for having done you wrong so long, Frankie.'

'Yes, yes, papa, I have,' said he; 'but I am so very——' here he was going to say 'miserable,' and the next moment would have made a clean breast of all his woes, but a glance full of warning from 'Uncle' Ferdinand stopped him short; the unfinished sentence was kindly concluded for him by that gentleman himself.

'The poor boy means he is quite upset with everybody's kindness, Arden.'

'Good lad, good lad,' said Sir Robert; and he stroked his step-son's head with tender approval.

Curiously enough, not only he, but Lady Arden herself, was persuaded that Mr. Walcot's explanation of Frankie's tears was correct; the scene had been certainly enough to 'upset' the nerves of any sensitive boy.

But Mr. Walcot's glance of warning had been caught by another beside him to whom it was addressed.

'The boy is afraid of him,' mused Mr. Mayne to himself. 'He has got the whip-hand of the poor child in some way, as he thinks he has of me. I'll take the whip out of your hand,' he muttered between lips pale with passion, 'and then if I don't lay it about your own shoulders, Ferdinand Walcot, call me a landlubber.'

It is a mistake made by many persons of too masterful a disposition to consider only the

wrongs they do in relation to those they wrong. There are natures capable of being roused to very active antagonism by tyrannies committed against others, and with which they have no sort of connection.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME INDOOR GAMES.

The afternoon was wet, so that the party at Halcombe was thrown upon its internal resources for amusement. In ordinary cases of the kind the males would have repaired to the billiard-room, and, perhaps, even enlisted a fair recruit or two: but on the present occasion it was felt that 'Fifie' (as the girls called Frank, when in especial favour, or in trouble) was deserving of especial honour; and it was decided, with the consent of the good-natured visitors, that he should choose his own game, and be the Lord of Misrule until dinner-time.

For myself I love children, but I hate their games; my knees are too stiff to take a share in their athletics; I can't rise from the ground

when at full-length 'without touching anything,' even to oblige a lady of the most fairy-like description; as to that 'Here we go round, round, round,' the very remembrance of the exercise as practised by others gives me the vertigo; while the notion of 'weighing sacks' is to a person of my build both dangerous and preposterous. Bad as these things are, the 'sitting-down' games of children are infinitely worse; they require a readiness of mind which has long deserted me, and an indifference to public criticism which I have not yet acquired. The propositions of the little Misses, however, are on the whole much more alarming, because more subtle and exacting, than those of their playmates of the other sex, and the party at Halcombe Hall might well congratulate itself that it had placed itself so unreservedly at least in the hands of a male.

Frank decided on 'Robber King' as the amusement for the afternoon; a choice which might, perhaps, have been appealed against by the young ladies as being somewhat of

a hoydenish—not to say rompish—nature, had not the Great Baba at once expressed his approval of the idea, which was necessarily final.

'I ike wobber kings,' he shouted, 'and murders and ghostisses—tum along.'

Sir Robert, though he too liked 'playing at ghostisses' as we have reason to know, was excused on the score of indisposition; 'Uncle Ferdinand' we may be certain did not receive an invitation; and Lady Arden, protesting it was 'one of her bad days,' retired to the drawing-room sofa and the last novel of fashionable life. But the rest, even including the Curate—who was impressed (not willingly) by Mayne on the ground that it was his duty to convert the Robber King—were all included in the proscription. This game consists in all but one person going to hide, and remaining *perdu* till discovered by the King, who carries them off to durance, where they remain till rescued by some member of the party who has not been discovered, and who steals out of

his hiding-place with the noble intention of releasing the captives.

The prison was a painted oriel in the great hall which threw 'warm gules' and other mellowed hues upon its tenants, who were immured behind a curtain of tapestry.

This mediæval retreat was found, singularly enough, to be generally inhabited by but one pair of victims at a time; and that pair were for the most part Mr. and Mrs. Raynes (who remained in captivity for such long intervals that they were dubbed Baron and Baroness Trenck), and George Gresham and the German governess.

'It is a most extraordinary thing,' observed Mayne to the Curate, who found themselves for once thus incarcerated together, 'that I have relieved Gresham and Miss Hurt from this blessed dungeon about half a dozen times.'

'So have I,' replied the other, gravely.

'Then it is my opinion they get caught on purpose. Perhaps he wishes to improve himself in the German tongue.'

'Perhaps,' said the Curate; 'I always find them talking together.'

'I suppose it's quite understood that he and Miss Nicoll are engaged to be married?' observed the other.

'It is understood so,' returned Dyneley, upon whom a crimson light had suddenly descended, though he was under a blue pane; 'but the engagement has never been publicly acknowledged.'

'It seems very odd, don't it?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said the Curate, drily. 'The mere fact of being found in an oriel window—or an arbour—alone with a young lady, proves nothing.'

Mr. Mayne laughed disconcertedly.

'Well, it seems to me that there's another game besides "Robber King" being played in this house, called "Cross Purposes"—— Hush! here's Baron Trenck; "for this relief small thanks."'

'Who would have thought of seeing you two? I always find Mr. Gresham and Miss Hurt

here.' And Mr. Raynes grinned a grin so significant, and at the same time so exquisitely comical, that the other two burst out laughing.

'Dear me,' cried Mrs. Raynes, suddenly appearing at the curtain (she was the most active of the band save the King himself, and the most devoted to the cause of the captives), 'only think of finding you three here; and what a noise you make! I generally release but two, and find them sitting as quiet as mice. Lor', Milly, how you frightened me! I thought it was the Robber King.'

'Nay,' said Milly, breathlessly, her bright face aglow with exercise, and her hair streaming behind her like a comet. 'You frightened *me*; I am not accustomed to come upon such batches of prisoners: it's like "La Force" in the French Revolution. I generally find only George and Miss Hurt, who—— Here is another Deliverer!'

There was indeed one and a half, for it was Evelyn with the Great Baba on her shoulder, whom she carried perched there with the same ease and grace with which Moorish

and other pictorial maidens bear their pitchers to the well. This little pitcher had not only ears, but a very active tongue, and (since silence was an imperative necessity of the game) it took all Evelyn's authority to keep him still, as she flitted from room to room. She never ran, but glided, and was always stately even at topmost speed. Mayne noticed that she had none of the high spirits of her younger sister, though there was so slight a difference in years between them. Like one who takes a hand at whist to oblige others, she did not seem to enjoy the game, though she played it very much better than the volunteers in question. Ere she could speak to the rest, the dreaded form of the Robber King withdrew the curtain, and in a voice that was meant for a murderess, cried, 'All caught!'

'Nay, sir, you are wrong,' said Evelyn. 'There are two more yet to find—Miss Hurt and George.'

'They count as one, for I always catch 'em together,' replied Frankie; and off he flashed to complete his victory.

At this speech, so corroborative of what all had been saying, or thinking, every one instantly glanced at Evy, except Mr. Dyneley, who wheeled round and stared at the painted window, as though he would have stared through it. This delicacy of conduct (as is often the case) cost the Curate dear; for if he had witnessed, like the rest, the calmness and unconcern with which Evelyn received this compromising intelligence, he would have been well assured that George Gresham, at least, was not a rival to be feared.

After this it was agreed by tacit consent that Robber King had been played out; and the more so since the Great Baba was clamorous for 'Ghostisses,' in which the game had been, to his mind, hitherto shamefully deficient.

So in the deepening dusk they all repaired to the library, and told terrible tales from which the Baba, in Evy's arms, snatched a fearful joy.

For my part, I doat on Ghosts; but the common sense and practical sagacity of the world have become so great that I dare not

repeat these stories. One of them, however, is worth recording: first, because it took the unusual course of demonstrating that inanimate as well as animate objects are subject to supernatural influences; and secondly, because it was told by the very last person in that part of the country who would have been suspected of telling stories, namely, Mr. Raynes. Moreover, it had the very rarest and most valuable attribute that a ghost story can have—it was the record of a personal experience of the narrator.

'It was in one afternoon of this very month some ten years ago,' began Mr. Raynes, 'that I entered the Great Western express at Minden to go down to Exeter. I was late and hurried at the station, and in my confusion left behind me on a bench on the platform a little black bag full of papers of great importance. I had just retired from my profession——'

'What's dat?' inquired the Great Baba, who wished to have every particular explained to him, at all times, but especially regarding so important a subject as Ghostisses.

A great many people besides this intelligent infant would also have been glad to learn what Mr. Raynes's calling had been previously to his undertaking the *rôle* of country gentleman, so that the question was as full of interest as of pertinence.

'When people are wise, Baba,' observed Mr. Raynes, 'and have made a little money to live upon, they proceed to enjoy themselves for the rest of their lives without working one bit more, and that is called retiring from their profession.'

This explanation, accompanied as it was by one of the most tremendous grins of which the human muscles are capable, was apparently found satisfactory by his interlocutor. So Mr. Raynes continued as follows: 'In that bag, I say, I had the title-deeds of The Lilacs, of which I had become possessed that very day; and, being in very good spirits, I was not at all in a humour to be frightened by ghosts, or anything else, until I found myself alone in the railway carriage without the bag. The instant

I had taken my seat, and the train began to move, I knew that I had left it behind me, and the sense of loss was most acute and depressing. I did not reflect at the time (being quite unused to business matters) that no one could easily make use of the deeds but myself, but really felt as if I had become suddenly beggared. The change from gaiety of heart to despondency was overwhelming. Had there been any communication between guard and passenger at that epoch—which there was not, I think—I should have stopped that down express for the purpose of informing its custodian that I had left a black bag at Minden station, and would be obliged to him to reverse the engine and fetch it.

'A prey to these anxious thoughts, I happened suddenly to look up, and there, in the opposite corner of the carriage, stood the very bag before me, with a copy of the "Evening Standard" half thrust into its mouth, as I well remember to have left it. The carriage was a first-class one, and tolerably well lighted, so

that there could be no mistake about it, although five minutes before I could have taken my Bible oath that no bag was there. I verily trembled with agitation, and I must needs confess with something like superstitious fear, so confident was I, both that there it was, and that there it had not been. I had not a doubt that it was my bag, and no other, and yet it was some seconds before I could compose my mind, and assure myself how it had got there; namely, that I had flung it there myself as I hurriedly entered, but that in the gloom of the carriage, as compared with the light from which I had come, it had escaped my observation. My mind gradually calmed down from excitement to content and gratitude; and presently I got up, walked to where the bag lay in its corner, and was about to take the newspaper out to read, when that journal was suddenly drawn down into the bag as though by some hidden hand within it, and its half-open mouth was closed in my very face with a sharp snap.

'Anything more surprising it has never

been my lot to experience, and very few things more alarming; if it had been a black dog instead of a black bag that had thus snapped at me I should not have been half so disconcerted. I suddenly felt cowed and uncanny, as though in an unseen presence that had some connection with the bag, and as different from the proud possessor of that desirable estate, The Lilacs, as he had been half an hour ago as it is possible to conceive. It was my own bag, to all appearance, and yet it had never snapped its faithful lips at me before, or shown any external symptoms of vitality. I am ashamed to say that I left the thing where it was, untouched, and without making any further attempt to establish its identity, till the train stopped at Swindon, when I stepped out with great alacrity—almost into the arms of the guard. 'What is it, sir?' inquired he, as I stared back into the carriage.

'"Well, there's a bag," said I, not liking to say "*My* bag," which, as it turned out, was lucky.

'"Ah, yes; I was coming for that," said he.

"There's a sad story about that bag, or at least its owner. He had put it into this carriage, with his newspaper in it, but delayed to get in himself till after the bell rang. The train started at the same moment, and he was caught between the wheels and the platform and killed upon the spot. Leastways, so the telegram says. So, if one may say so, the bag belongs to a *Dead Man.*"'

When the audience had recovered from the shock of this recital, and were asking, according to custom, what became of Mr. Raynes's own black bag (as if *that* were the object of interest), Mr. Frederic Mayne was trying to remember under what circumstances he had heard this story before. That he *had* heard it he felt certain, and also that he had not read it. Some one had told it to him, and, what was very singular, was that after that narration some one had grinned at him, just as Mr. Raynes had done at the assembled company when he came to his conclusion. It was impossible that Mr. Raynes himself, whom he had never seen until

that afternoon, could have been the previous narrator; and yet the whole thing, including the grin, seemed not so much to have been presented to his eyes as reproduced. Was it possible that in a previous state of existence the Cheshire Cat and he had met and told ghost stories to one another, and that this was one of them?

CHAPTER VII.

A DANGEROUS TOPIC.

It was no doubt this telling of ghost stories round the library fire which suggested to Frederic Mayne as a topic of conversation after dinner, that evening, modern Spiritual Manifestations. It was an unfortunate one in many respects; but he was quite unaware of the attraction which the subject possessed in his host's eyes, and of the reverence with which he regarded it. The family always avoided any reference to the matter; nor did they, even to their intimates, confess the hold that it had taken upon Sir Robert's imagination. They respected him too much to risk making him an object of ridicule to any person, especially in that neighbourhood, the inhabitants of which, being both

old-fashioned and 'Philistine,' were not likely to receive any details of the New Gospel with much faith, or even patience. I am afraid, indeed, that public opinion in those parts, if it had expressed itself at all on such a newfangled matter, would have described the great apostles of Spiritualism as persons who wished to fill their own pockets at the expense of their disciples, a class whom in their turn they set down as one who 'from their money are soon parted.'

Under these circumstances it was no wonder that Sir Robert's 'peculiar' ideas were not talked about beyond the family circle; or that Gresham had not alluded to them even to his friend Mayne.

Who amongst us is so fortunate as not to have experienced, once or twice in his life, the terrible revelation of having unconsciously said something in a company which has produced in it a catastrophe little inferior to that of the explosion of a shell? This accidental treading on the social fuse is so calamitous to all concerned

—but especially to him who has put his foot in it, or on it—that I have always advocated the most stringent precautions; it would be a good plan, for example, if along with the *carte* at every dinner-table there was placed opposite to each guest a brief and epitomised biography of each of his two neighbours, with anything peculiar or abnormal italicised thus: '*Divorced*'—'*A convert*'—'*An advocate of woman's rights*'—'*Madness in the family*'—'*Father hung*,' &c. Then we should know how to steer, and, at all events, to avoid the more perilous risks of conversation. To come 'stem on,' as Mr. Mayne would have called it, right against one of them, without the possibility of 'backing' or 'stopping,' is a shocking circumstance; how much more terrible, then, is it to blunder unwittingly on some delicate topic that discomposes an entire company! This is what poor Mr. Mayne felt he had done directly he had uttered the words 'Spiritual Manifestations.'

There was no outward sign of disturbance, except that Gresham made a face as if about to

whistle; but Mayne knew by the general silence that he was on dangerous ground, as surely as though he had sunk up to his knees through the dining-room carpet.

Curiously enough, Sir Robert himself seemed by no means disinclined to discuss the topic; of ridicule he stood in no fear, having never experienced its darts; while just now there were certain reasons, with which we are acquainted, that made him very willing to receive what scientific folks call 'contributions' to the subject in question. He did not understand, as any one familiar with the world would have done, that Frederic Mayne was not the sort of person to appreciate natural phenomena, unless they came in some very distinct and material shape, such as a meteoric stone, and hit him.

'You have had some experience, Mr. Mayne, no doubt,' he said, 'with respect to this curious subject?'

'Well, yes, Sir Robert; I have been an idle man with more money than I knew what to do

with, and very little judgment I fear to direct its expenditure; and among other things on which I wasted my cash was *séances*, or, in other words, small conjuring tricks done in the dark.'

'That is not the view of many eminent persons upon that subject,' observed Sir Robert, gravely: 'nor, if it is worth while to say so, is it *my* view.'

'This is a free country,' replied Mayne, smiling, 'and every man has a right to his own opinion. For my part, however, I do not believe in the spirits of the Dead communicating with audiences of the Living at so much a head.'

'Perhaps you do not believe in their communicating with the Living at all?'

Mr. Mayne smiled, half-courteously, half-cynically (it was difficult with him to 'put up' with humbug under any circumstances), and turned to his neighbour with 'What is your opinion, Mr. Raynes?'

'We have our philosophical person,' was

that gentleman's unexpected reply, 'to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors; ensconcing ourselves into knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear. Such, at least, is the opinion of the Divine William, and by him I always stick.'

'The Divine William?' exclaimed Sir Robert, interrogatively.

'W. S., of Stratford-on-Avon,' exclaimed Mr. Raynes, with a grin that would have convulsed the company had the subject on hand been a less delicate and personal one.

'I did not remember that Shakespeare took that view,' said Sir Robert, rubbing his thin hands. 'You will not deny that *he* is some authority, Mr. Mayne.'

'On mundane matters, I will grant it,' returned that gentleman; 'but he lived in a superstitious age, and must necessarily have suffered from its influences.'

'I am afraid Mr. Mayne has not much rever-

ence for authority of any kind,' said Mr. Walcot, with a grave smile.

'I don't know what "authority" you have for that statement, Mr. Walcot,' answered Mayne, contemptuously; 'but I confess I prefer to believe in what is accompanied by proofs rather than by assertions.'

'Indeed?' said Mr. Walcot. And though he uttered but that one word, it gave Mr. Mayne to understand that he (Mayne) was the very last man whom the speaker would have supposed likely to appeal to proof—after that adventure in the arbour that morning.

'If you mean by proof, the personal experience of credible witnesses, Mr. Mayne,' pursued Sir Robert, speaking with great gravity; 'the subject of which we speak has ample corroboration. Without going farther than this dining-room, I could find a witness to many of those manifestations to which the term "incredible" has been freely applied.'

'At the risk of being called sceptical, I should like to see them myself,' said Mr.

Mayne; 'but, unfortunately, it seems I have no chance, since the presence of "sceptics" has always been found fatal to these interesting proceedings.'

'I beg your pardon,' observed Mr. Walcot, glancing at his brother-in-law, and speaking with a certain air of haughtiness; 'the presence of a sceptic is no hindrance, but that of an unsympathetic person is.'

'Unsympathetic with what?' inquired Mayne, curtly.

'With religious instincts and influences,' observed Mr. Walcot, drily; 'and especially with the appreciation of the fact that we material creatures are surrounded by spiritual beings, who have us more or less in keeping, as has been abundantly proved in these latter days by the so-called manifestations.'

'Heavenly shows,' muttered Mr. Raynes. 'That is also in the Divine William.'

'There!' said Sir Robert, triumphantly. 'I had no idea you were such a student of Shakespeare, Mr. Raynes.'

'The quotation is from "Othello",' observed the Curate, smiling; 'but it does not go to strengthen Mr. Walcot's position.

> When devils will their blackest sins put on
> They do suggest at first with heavenly shows.'

Mayne laughed aloud; Gresham (though he knew his uncle's eye was on him) could not restrain a titter; and Mr. Raynes outdid himself with a grin of the first magnitude.

'That is quite the theologian's view,' observed Mr. Walcot, contemptuously. 'They admit the facts, and even allow their supernatural character; but they set them down to the intervention of his Satanic Majesty.'

'That is not *my* view,' said the Curate, laughing; 'for putting *Diabolus* for *Deus*, I think the poet's "*nec Deus intersit*" should settle that matter. It is surely scarcely worth while for so important a personage as you have mentioned to make use of spirit-rappers?'

'You are talking about what you do not understand, Mr. Dyneley,' said Walcot, with

another glance at Sir Robert, who remained silent. 'May I ask what you understand by spirit-rappers?'

'Impostors; persons who do not hesitate, for the sake of filthy lucre, to affect communion with spirits of the departed,' said Mr. Dyneley calmly. 'Men who take advantage of a reverence they do not share to mislead their dupes.'

It was with astonishment that those who knew him best heard the Curate thus express himself; his tone was very earnest, and his face, which was fixed on that of his interlocutor, had a certain defiance in it: it seemed to say, 'I have been silent on this topic longer than I should have been, and now I tell you what I think of it—and of you.'

'I am sure, Dyneley,' said Sir Robert, speaking with great emotion, 'that you would not use such language as that which has just fallen from your lips, if you had given your attention to this important subject. I myself have done so, and there is another here who can claim still

deeper acquaintance with it. It pains me beyond expression to——' Here he stopped and turned to his brother-in-law—'I think, Ferdinand, it is only right in this company of honourable men that you should give your personal testimony to the truth.'

'As you please, Arden,' answered Mr. Walcot, indifferently; 'though there are minds here to-day, as there were of old, of whom it may be said that neither would they believe though one rose from the dead.'

'*I* should,' observed Mr. Mayne, who, intent on his enemy, did not notice the bright spots on Sir Robert's cheeks; 'only I must see the spectre in broad daylight, not with the shutters shut and the lights turned down, as is the modern fashion.'

'I have seen no spectres,' continued Mr. Walcot, calmly; 'but I have heard their voices, and had incontestable evidence of their presence. They have dictated words to me, too sacred, indeed, for repetition——'

Here Mayne would have laughed outright

had not Gresham kicked his shins under the table.

'Words that it would be sacrilegious to expose to the ridicule of the frivolous and unthinking, but which, I hope, have made me a better and a purer man.'

'What a rascal he must have been before!' muttered Mr. Mayne, beneath his breath.

'Moreover,' pursued Mr. Walcot, 'certain material experiences have occurred to me, in the presence of many and credible witnesses, which contravene what we perhaps ignorantly term "laws of Nature." I have been carried bodily up into the air by unseen hands; you may conclude such position to be without parallel——'

'Nay,' observed Mr. Dyneley; 'there was Asmodeus.'

'Likewise,' remarked Mr. Mayne, 'a party of the name of Guppy; but that was a lady.'

It was plain that war had been declared. Gresham, out of respect for his uncle, said nothing, but it was easy to read on which side

his sympathies lay. Mr. Raynes's countenance wore an air of supernatural gravity, which could not, however, be depended upon, for when this was the case he was always the more liable to facial convulsions.

'I say ignorant persons,' continued Mr. Walcot, 'may imagine such an experience to be unique, but to all who are acquainted with the records of Spiritualism there is nothing new in it. I have never been seized in this way, as some have, out of doors; but I have been carried out of the window of a room and back again through another.'

'Through glass and all?' inquired Mr. Mayne, with the air of a Miss Rosa Dartle who asks 'merely for information.'

'It was summer time, and the windows were open, sir.'

'I was afraid you might have cut yourself,' explained Mr. Mayne. 'You say you were carried by unseen hands. Now, if they were unseen, how did you know they were hands?'

'I felt myself balanced upon so many finger-

points. If you have ever played the body in the child's game of "Take breath and lift," which is merely science in sport, you will understand what I mean.'

Sir Robert, as though he had been recently playing the game, and had therefore the most lively recollection of it, nodded adhesion. It was to him that Mr. Dyneley now addressed himself, partly because he thought it his duty to protest against his infatuation, and partly because he had not the patience to discuss the matter with Mr. Walcot.

'I don't see even now, sir, why the points should have been finger-points,' he said. 'Your brother-in-law may have associated the notion in his mind with being lifted by the hand, because things in general *are* lifted by the hand. But the theory of the unseen hands appears to me as unsubstantial as the hands themselves.'

'Mr. Dyneley has doubtless had no experience of spirit hands,' observed Walcot, carelessly; the remark appeared to be a general one, but was in reality addressed to Sir Robert.

'He certainly has not,' observed the Curate, in a tone so decisive that it seemed to convey the addition 'nor has anybody else either.'

'I have seen spirit hands myself,' observed Sir Robert, speaking with great gravity, and in accents that trembled with emotion; 'and though I have never experienced what Ferdinand has just described, I have every reason—independently of his word, which, with me, at all events, is final—to credit it.'

'No one wishes to doubt a gentleman's word, Sir Robert,' answered the Curate; gently, 'but in a personal narrative in which the narrator himself admits the facts to be contrary to the laws of Nature, it is surely permissible to suppose that he has—involuntarily—deceived himself, or has been deceived.'

'The same observation may be made on those who have described the miracles in Holy Writ,' observed Mr. Walcot.

'I must really object to place your testimony—or any man's—upon the same ground with that of inspired writers,' observed the Curate.

'I think when "tall" stories of any kind are told in the first person,' added Mr. Mayne, 'that they should be prefaced by some such observation as "I could not have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes."'

'Then you do not believe, it seems,' said Walcot, coolly, 'Sir Robert's assertion that he has seen spirit hands; you think it a "tall" story?'

'I was not referring to Sir Robert's statement, which moreover is less in altitude by a story or two than your story. If you insist on a reply as to whether I believe that you were carried out of window on the points of unseen fingers——'

'Gentlemen,' said Sir Robert, rising with flushed face, 'I must beg that this discussion be discontinued. Let us join the ladies.'

The invitation was of course complied with; but it was not to be expected that the objectionable topic of conversation should not be revived elsewhere.

'I think,' said Mr. Raynes in a low voice to

Gresham as they stood together with their backs to the drawing-room fire, 'Mr. Walcot's being carried into the air, ever so high—was just a little—eh?' and his mouth stretched into such a grin that it seemed to go all round his head.

'It was a big lie,' returned Gresham, confidentially; 'though I sincerely wish it had been true, and more.'

'How so?'

'Well, I wish the spirit hands had not only taken him into the air, but forgotten to bring him back again.'

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AWAKENED CONSCIENCE.

THE 'intelligent reader' has, without doubt, observed that the more peculiar are our friends' opinions the more 'touchy' they are about them; that their sensitiveness, in fact, varies in inverse proportion to the popularity of their theories. Thus one may express one's own ideas in comparative safety to a Tory or a Radical; but it is highly dangerous to venture on such a course with a Vegetarian, or a Ritualist, or a Homœopath. Always in expectation of ridicule, these good folks scent in every word the flavour of offence, and woe be to him who treads upon the tender topic. And of all susceptible gentry that adorn our planet the

believers in Spiritualism are the most thin-skinned.

Sir Robert Arden was not only a believer but a devotee. If he could not aver with a gentleman of my acquaintance that he saw as much of his wife (who had been a lady of fashion, and of whom the thing might therefore have been said without great exaggeration) since she was dead, as he had seen in her life-time, his thoughts were more fixed upon her than even when she was alive; he held communion with her, or believed that he did so, every hour of the day, and was, in short, in spirit, a bigamist. It was quite true that he had seen her hand, or a hand that he believed to be hers, stretched out towards him from the abyss of Futurity, and even with a certain ring upon it which established its identity. And we may therefore imagine with what annoyance, nay, with what pain and indignation, he had listened to the sceptical, and it must be confessed somewhat contemptuous, remarks of Mr. Mayne and the Curate. Gresham, indeed, had

not joined them in their expressions of disbelief; but the incredulity, and something more—a pity for his own fevered fancies—that he had read in his nephew's face, had chafed him almost beyond endurance. His indignation could only, in fact, be compared with that of Rip Van Winkle, when he failed to convince those dearest and nearest to him of his own identity; but, unlike Rip, Sir Robert had one friend at hand to appreciate his position, to understand his troubles, and to rouse his wrath against the authors of it. In the dining-room Sir Robert's sense of the duties of a host had restrained him from showing what he felt; and afterwards, when he had time for reflection, his kindly nature had suggested to him that, after all, it was mere ignorance that had caused these young men to err, and no intention to give offence. His sense of justice even caused him to attempt to put himself in their place, and look at the matter from their own point of view; which, however, proved a failure, for not only is it very difficult to regard the subject next

one's heart *ab extra*, but also he was of course ignorant of the real reasons of the antagonism that had been exhibited in the matter: by Mayne from his personal dislike of Walcot, and by Dyneley from the indignation he felt at seeing his host so fooled by his unscrupulous relative.

When the party had broken up, and Walcot and he repaired to the study together, as generally happened, to smoke their cigarettes before retiring for the night, Sir Robert had half resolved to pass over the affair, and if he could not forget the pain that had been inflicted on him, to ignore it. His natural courtesy, however, compelled him to utter a few words of vicarious apology.

'I am deeply grieved, Ferdinand,' he said, 'that I should have been the involuntary means to-night of putting, I do not say an insult—for I am sure it was not meant as such—but a rudeness upon you.'

Mr. Walcot smiled a deprecatory smile, and threw into his large eyes a look of interrogation.

'I mean, of course,' pursued the Baronet, 'that if it had not been for my evoking your testimony, it would not have been received with such discourtesy.'

'My dear Arden, so far as I am concerned,' returned the other in a tone in which indifference and gravity were strangely mingled, 'the thing matters nothing. I am too much accustomed to the ribaldry of coarse and brutal natures for it to weigh a feather's weight with me. If I was angry—and I confess I was deeply moved—it was upon your account, not mine. No respect was owed to *me*; but considering the position in which you stood to those three young men—the host of one of them, the patron of another, and the uncle and benefactor of the third—their contemptuous reception of a fact personally vouched for by yourself was most offensive.'

'Never mind, never mind, Ferdinand,' put in Sir Robert, quickly. 'The thing was undoubtedly not in good taste, but I shall endeavour to think no more about it. If you

are ready to pass it over, it certainly does not become me to take up the cudgels on my own account;' and he waved his hand as though dismissing an unpleasant subject.

'You are above all petty feelings, I know, Arden; and your forgiveness of these persons, so far as you are concerned, does you honour. It has failed to strike you, however, that others, however willing, however disposed to forgive, may be unable to divest themselves of the consequences flowing from this outrageous conduct.'

'Others?' repeated Sir Robert, in a puzzled tone; 'eh, I see; you refer to Mr. Raynes. You think that I have suffered some humiliation in his eyes from the conduct of three young men. He seemed himself to be by no means a scoffer. Still I think I can afford to incur the commiseration of Mr. Raynes.'

And Sir Robert drew himself up with some disdain.

'I think you may, Arden,' answered Walcot, smiling gravely. 'The man is a buffoon, and intended by Nature, I believe, to grin through

a horse-collar. I overheard him telling Lady Arden in the drawing-room, *apropos* of Frank, that she must expect him to give her a good deal of trouble; "Boys will be boys," he said, "and it does 'em good; go it while young, is my motto."'

'Go it while young,' repeated Sir Robert. 'Dear me.'

'A graceful sentiment, was it not, and gracefully expressed? No, Arden; I was not referring to Mr. Raynes, when I spoke of "others" being influenced by what was said to-night, independently of their own volition. Are you not aware that nothing is so resented by the Spiritual Nature as scoffing unrebuked? It was—I do not say your "fault," but your agency which brought about that deplorable discussion; it was you, however involuntarily, who drew down upon the most sacred of subjects those vulgar shafts of ridicule; and it was your place—you must permit me to say—to have resented them with vigour, ay, and rigour.'

'I could not quarrel with men under my

own roof, Ferdinand, for the expression of their opinions.'

'It was not, Arden, in my poor judgment,' returned the other, speaking with great gravity, 'a question of quarrel, but rather a matter calling for stern and swift rebuke; and as for the expression of opinion, surely you would be the first to repress a word of indecency or irreverence; and was it not irreverence to express an open disbelief, nay, a contemptuous scorn for an experience which you yourself have told me has formed the greatest solace of your life, and which it is your highest hope may be vouchsafed enlargement? Since you avowed that you had been privileged to see your lost Madeline's hand, was it not worth while—that fact being denied—to maintain it? Or do you flatter yourself that the spirits around us are unconscious of our moral cowardice, or unconcerned for the great truths which it is their mission to reveal?'

'Do you mean to imply, Ferdinand,' stammered Sir Robert, with intense emotion, 'that

I may have involuntarily offended Madeline? Oh, you do not know her nature; moreover, if conscious, as you say, of what took place, she will also know that it was my very reverence that forbad my discussing an affair in which she herself——'

'You mistake me altogether, Arden,' interrupted the other. 'The matter—if I have any understanding of it—does not concern herself, save in our gross and mortal sense of personality, but will have reference to her spiritual nature, which has, as it were, been outraged in your presence, and with complete impunity. These matters are beyond my ken, as they are beyond that of all of us; but I fear, Arden—I greatly fear—that your communion with that departed soul has ceased for ever.'

'What?' exclaimed Sir Robert, with extreme excitement; 'do you mean to say that I shall now not see her? That I have thus offended her—though I acted for the best—so as to be beyond the reach of pardon? I cannot believe it. It is not justice.'

'That is the cry of thousands, Arden,' answered the other, calmly. '"No one knows," says Holy Writ itself, "how oft he offendeth;" and yet if one does not know, one would think —in justice—there should be no offence. Such is the argument of that cold reason which those silly disputants of to-night would fain have imagined to be on their side.'

'Never to see her!' murmured Sir Robert, plaintively; 'and now no more even to hear her, or to be conscious of her sweet presence! It is a cruel sentence, Ferdinand.'

'It is not mine, Arden. I have no authority to pronounce it; and, for aught I know, it has not been pronounced. I have only expressed my fears. It is unreasonable to reproach me.'

'I will not; I do not; I reproach myself,' said the unhappy man, striking his breast with a feeble hand. 'Oh! what is it, think you, she would have me do?'

'I know not. You will learn—if it be permitted you to do so—in due time. But, if any

opportunity of grace is granted you, beware, I charge you, how you place in the balance, against the wishes of the dead, any earthly considerations such as those to which you have just now shown yourself so subservient. Men were bidden of old to give up for the true faith the very children of their loins; of you no such sacrifice can be demanded; but it may be you will have to choose, once and for ever, between the calls of this world and of the next, between convention and duty, between the living and the dead.'

'I have made my choice already, Ferdinand,' said Sir Robert, solemnly.

'Therein you have done well, Arden,' returned the other, taking the other's hand impressively; 'let us hope and pray that it may not be one of those good resolves which mortals make too late. Good night, and gracious dreams.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE HEAVENLY VISION.

It was late when Walcot bade his brother-in-law 'Good-night,' but Sir Robert showed no sign of retiring. He paced his room, with thoughtful face and bowed down head, for more than an hour, not with the quick tread of impatience, but with slow steps that ever and anon halted—when he would listen with attentive face to the autumn wind that swept the pane without, and to the rain that beat sullenly against it. It was at that window he had heard the mystic voice, but now there was no other sound there save the sighs and sobs of Nature. Presently he took up his bed candle, and opening a little door ascended by a spiral staircase, built in the thickness of the wall, to his dressing-

room, from whence he returned in a few minutes with some sheets of writing paper in his hand. As he reopened the little door his face exhibited an intense astonishment: a pair of wax candles which he had certainly left burning on his desk when he left the room had in his absence been extinguished.

The study was a large apartment, and the light he carried with him only partially illumined it; he stood gazing into the darker part with a vague look of expectancy and alarm. Once he stepped forward as though he would have explored this shrouded space; but he altered his mind, or perhaps his courage failed him, and he relit the candles from the one he carried. When he had done so he looked quickly up, uttered a low cry, half joy, half fear, and then fell back into his chair, with his eyes fixed eagerly before him.

At the opposite end of the room, and close to the wall, stood a young woman in a grey dress, with a belt fastened by two silver eagles. She was small of stature and very slight; her

complexion was dark, and her hair, which was short and curly like a boy's, though very fine, was black as night; but her face was very pale.

'Madeline?'

'Yes, dearest,' returned a low and gentle voice, 'it is I.'

There was a long silence; Sir Robert devoured her with his eyes, but seemed to be deprived alike of speech and motion, as though that one word of his had cost him half his vital powers. Presently the woman, still standing where she was, passed her hand to and fro slowly over her brow.

'It is unnecessary,' he murmured; 'though the memory of that dear sign is sweet to me. I have no doubts—but only fears.'

'It is well,' she answered, solemnly. 'I am not as I was; and though I could never harm you, willingly, it is perilous for you to approach me.'

'Are you happy, Madeline?' inquired he, in trembling tones.

She bowed her head, and a gentle sigh just reached his ears and died there, 'I am not unhappy.'

'I knew it,—for it is impossible that your spirit can be otherwise than among the blessed; but your face is sorrowful. There is something that troubles you upon another account. Can I remove that trouble?'

'You can.'

'Is it connected with your brother Ferdinand?'

She shook her head.

'Not with me, sweet spirit, surely; who would spend my last breath to give you ease?'

'Yes; with you.'

Sir Robert groaned, and hid his face. 'Oh, Madeline!' he murmured, 'I feared it.'

There was again silence for a time, which he was again the first to break.

'I have been looking into my soul, sweet spirit, for the records of my love for you, and they are unsullied. Still I may have wronged

you unawares. Is it painful to you to tell me how, that I may amend my ways?'

'It is not painful; but our speech to mortals is limited. We are forbidden to say all we would.'

'Yes, yes; I understand; your words are precious, as indeed I feel them to be; each syllable a jewel, each sigh for our poor sakes like blessed balm. Oh, gracious spirit!'

He looked at her with a yearning devotion that drew from her another gentle sigh.

'It cannot be my second marriage that has offended you,' he went on, 'for it was your last wish that I should wed.'

The apparition smiled a sweet sad smile, and waved a deprecatory hand.

'You have never offended *me*, Robert.'

'Ah, then Ferdinand was right!' he exclaimed. 'I have offended against the law of your being—and the law-givers. I sat silent, while men blasphemed against it. I associated myself with the enemies of the Faith and of the Truth.'

The apparition bowed its head, and stood motionless with eyes closed, and chin resting upon its breast, beneath which its hands were folded. The wind and the rain had ceased, and the silence of midnight reigned in their stead.

'You are praying for me, Madeline; you are asking forgiveness for me of the Powers I have offended,' continued Sir Robert, earnestly. 'Oh, blessed spirit! henceforth, I promise you, they shall have nothing to complain of. I will right them, if it be necessary, with the strong hand. No scoffer shall raise his voice in my presence without rebuke—ay, and punishment. Your sweet face is still sad, Madeline. Can I do ought to make it otherwise? Ferdinand warned me the other day to be as wax in your loving hands, if so be they should deign to mould me. But, alas! I know not how to shape myself aright.'

The apparition made no sign, but stood in precisely the same attitude, a very monument of sorrowful tenderness.

'Oh, Madeline, let me know your wishes; do not fear the pain that they may cause me. They were always a law unto me, when you were on earth; is it likely that they should have less force with me now? There was a time when you could never think harshly of any one, or advise me to do a harsh action; but now that you are the mouthpiece of the heavenly powers, it may be your unwilling duty to deal more sternly; if so, I shall know how to obey you. It is true that I have formed other ties, and dear ones; but I shall not hesitate to do your bidding, even though it snaps my heart-strings. Speak, dearest, speak; in what can I pleasure those who send you, or solace *you?*'

She slowly disengaged one of her folded hands, and pointed towards him.

'You hold in your hand, Robert, the means of doing right to the living and to the dead.'

'Ah, true; it is my will. I brought it down to-night for final scrutiny. I had doubts and scruples, which will now be resolved for

me beyond question. You will set me right, Madeline, where otherwise, perchance, through mortal weakness, I might err.'

'Nay, dear one, nay,' returned the apparition; 'it is no task for those who have shaken off their earthly burthen to deal with dross. Let your own conscience—but always having the furtherance of your spiritual faith in view—be your guide; give no occasion for the scoffer to rejoice; spare not, though without resentment, to chasten him.'

Sir Robert bowed his head, but his face was troubled; even in that awful presence his gentle nature asserted itself on the side of mercy and forgiveness.

'There is enough and to spare for all,' he pleaded. 'I have made full provision for him who is near and dear to you; I owed him much upon my own account, but it was the knowledge that Ferdinand was your brother, Madeline, which has most made him mine.'

'I ask nothing for Ferdinand,' she answered,

gravely. 'Nothing, that is, for his own needs; but it rests with you how powerful an instrument he may be made for good.'

'I understand, my darling. It shall be done as though your own hands did it. Can I do aught else to show my devotion to you—well' (for she had raised a deprecatory hand)—'to the good cause. I love it, I respect it, Madeline; but my love for you—such an expression can be no disloyalty—is paramount.'

She smiled a sad but gracious smile. 'You are mortal still,' she said.

'Would that I were otherwise,' he answered, gravely. 'I wear my earthly garment with impatience; it is old and worn, and sad of hue; when, oh! when shall I meet you, dearest, as spirit to spirit, without this film, which I am forbidden to pierce, between us?'

'That is beyond my ken, Robert,' was the solemn reply; 'nor, if I knew it, would it be permitted me to reveal it. Something, however, I know, which it is lawful to hint of. If you would wait Heaven's good time—as is

your duty—in this earthly sphere, you must leave Halcombe.'

'Indeed! what danger lurks here?'

'I said naught of danger.' For the first time the spirit's voice had something of reproach in it.

'Forgive me, Madeline; it should be, indeed, enough to receive such gracious warning, without cavil. I will go, as Ferdinand has advised me. Next to you I look to him for counsel; but to you first and foremost. When I have done all that you require of me, may I reverently hope that your presence may be again vouchsafed to my mortal eyes?'

'You may, Robert. I have been always near you, and feel myself drawn nearer, thanks to your good resolves. It is a sign that others have heard them. Listen!'

A soft and gentle melody began to fill the room. The apparition lifted both her hands on high. 'My blessing rests upon you.' Sir Robert bowed his head, while the faint music grew and grew till the unseen performers seemed

to be at his very side, then suddenly sank and ceased.

He looked up, and the vision had vanished.

With trembling limbs he approached the spot where it had stood, and convinced himself that it had really gone. Then he sat down at his desk, and wrote and wrote till the candles began to burn low in their sockets; ever and anon he paused, as if in doubt, or as though to catch some hoped-for sound; then with a sigh that alone broke the silence of the night he would toil on.

CHAPTER X.

THE LIGHT IN THE FARMYARD.

If a due appreciation of one's own merits is necessary, as is generally understood, to our getting on in the world, and attaining eminence in our profession, it is certain that the Rev. John Dyneley would never have been a Bishop, nor even a Dean. And with this personal modesty he combined a tenderness for other people's feelings which is perhaps still more fatal to worldly success. If he did anything by accident (for it was never done on purpose) to offend or annoy a fellow-creature, the remembrance of it interfered with his appetite and even his sleep, till he had apologised or made amends. It may be imagined, then, with what feelings he returned to his lodgings at the

Manor Farm on the night of that little dinner party at the Hall, with the consciousness of having wounded the susceptibilities of one for whom he entertained a regard that was almost reverence; for that he had done so was evident enough, through all the gloss which Sir Robert, in the character of host, had courteously put upon the affair. And yet the Curate's conscience did not reproach him for the part which he had taken in the matter: it had again and again suggested to him that he should make some effort to open Sir Robert's eyes to the superstition he was known to cherish, and, if such an opportunity as had offered itself had been neglected, he felt that his silence would have been base and cowardly. His language and manner to Mr. Walcot could not, it is true, have been termed conciliatory; nor had he intended them to be so; he had fully meant them to express the scorn and contempt he felt for the man and his machinations; but unfortunately Sir Robert had regarded them as being addressed to himself.

It was a case of 'Love me, love my cur,' as Mayne phrased it; and they had both trodden rather heavily upon the cur's tail.

Whatever happens, *that* at least is a satisfactory incident,' the young man had argued, but without affording much comfort to the Curate.

Perhaps, besides his feelings of friendship for Sir Robert, the reflection occurred to him that the Baronet was the arbiter of Evelyn Nicoll's destinies; but, to do him justice, that was a secondary matter. His chief trouble was that in Sir Robert's eyes he must have seemed to repay his uninterrupted kindness and consideration with ingratitude. The method by which Walcot had affected to transfer the Curate's incredulity from himself to Sir Robert had been coarse and impudent, but it was clear that it had succeeded; not a word had the latter said to any one of the three young men after they left the dining-room; and, on the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Raynes, he had withdrawn to his study, without so much as a 'Good evening.'

It was late when Mr. Dyneley left the Hall that night, but he was in no humour for sleep; and on reaching home he exchanged his evening clothes for a morning suit, and, quickly letting himself out of doors, betook himself, as his custom was when anything troubled him, to the breezy moor for a 'constitutional.' For my part, I envy the men—and their legs—who have the power 'to walk off' annoyance as though it were a physical ailment; and there are many who can. The Rev. John Dyneley, for example, returned upon this occasion from his solitary 'stretcher' almost in a state of mental convalescence; he had persuaded himself that the thing would 'blow over,' and that Sir Robert would meet him next morning with his usual hearty greeting, as though nothing had happened.

It was morning already by the clock, though darkness and deepest night still reigned in Halcombe Valley. The villagers kept wholesome hours, and all lights, save those at the Hall, were wont to be extinguished well

nigh as early as in the old curfew days. At two in the morning, therefore, the spectacle of a light moving about the rickyard of the Manor Farm, which was now revealed to the Curate's eye, partook almost of the nature of a portent. If Halcombe had been marshy he would have taken it for a Will of the Wisp, especially as its movements were intermittent; it glinted for a second, and then disappeared; and then shone again only to be hidden.

Dyneley at once concluded that it was a lantern shielded by a cloak. There was neither distress in the locality nor discontent, yet somehow the word 'incendiarism' involuntarily suggested itself to him. It was very unlikely, but not more so than that the light should be there at all; and, as we have said, its proceedings were not those of an honest light. If aught had disturbed Gilbert Holm, and caused him to take cognisance of his property at such an hour, it would not have behaved in that erratic fashion. The young farmer might possibly have made some personal enemy, who,

with the ignorance characteristic of the rustic villain, was about to wreak his vengeance on him by destroying what the Insurance Company would have to replace.

Gilbert Holm, as his lodger knew, had his faults and his weakness; he had on more than one occasion of late seen him under the influence of liquor; but he was a good-natured, hearty young fellow, honest as the day, so far as Dyneley knew, and certainly not one to have willingly harmed any man. Moreover, he was known to be in pecuniary difficulties, and this infamous attempt—if so it should prove—to increase them, made the Curate doubly indignant. From where he stood, it was a less distance to the Farm than to the rickyard, and it would have been the natural instinct of all those excellent persons whose practice it is to mind their own business to apprise Gilbert Holm of the danger that threatened him, and leave him to take his own measures to avert it.

The Rev. John Dyneley, however, was of a disposition so *bizarre* and quaint, that he would

invariably put his duty to his neighbour in the first place, and his duty to himself in the second, or even lower still in the scale of motive; and allowing himself to be influenced by the fact that the rickyard might be in flames before he could give any warning to its proprietor, he vaulted lightly over the wall by the roadside, and dashed across the four-acre field which communicated with the spot in question. He had a stout stick and a stouter heart; and with those two things, even in these days of moral influence (and revolvers), good work can still be done.

Although the Curate ran so fleetly, he was by means a feather weight; but the grass and scattered straw prevented his footsteps from being heard, so that he came upon the supposed delinquent without warning. This was a man of middle height, slouched in a cloak, and he was at that very moment engaged in thrusting into the rick, by which he was stooping, a tallow candle. It was not a lighted candle; but, as the new comer at once perceived, was presently

to form the nucleus of the conflagration, and keep it going, if the materials of the rick itself should not prove sufficiently combustible.

The Curate also noticed with a grim smile (for he could now afford to smile, since he had arrived in time) that the incendiary had so contrived matters that the ricks only should be burned, and the dwelling-house spared, perhaps out of consideration for the Curate's own possessions, since one so malignant was very unlikely to have taken pains to spare his enemy.

Dyneley stood over the stooping man, with his cudgel sloped upon his shoulder, ready to strike if it should be necessary. There was plenty of time had he wished to take him at a disadvantage, for the fellow was a bungler at his evil work; the Curate noticed, moreover, that his hand shook—whether with guilt, or fear, or some physical ailment—as he strove to open the door of the lantern, and when he did so, the wind blew out the light. He had, however, a box of matches, and, having struck

one, had relit the wick, and was twisting up a piece of paper wherewith to set fire to the straw, when Dyneley laid his hand upon his shoulder.

The man sprang up, and was about to fall furiously upon him, when he recognised the face of the Curate, and threw up his hands with a piercing cry.

'Gilbert Holm, what are you doing here?' inquired the other, slowly.

At this the young farmer strove to recover himself. 'That is a pretty question,' he said, with a thin laugh, 'to ask of a man in his own farmyard. If you must know, Mr. Dyneley, I thought there were some queer people about the house—but it turns out that it was only you.'

'When you were touched, why did you cry out "My God!"'

'Because you startled me so.'

'No; that was not the reason. It was because you felt the eye of Man was on your crime. Poor fool! as though God could not

see you without my standing by. You were going to burn down the ricks.'

'What, my own ricks? You have called me a fool, but that would be a fool's trick, indeed.'

'If that was not your intention, why did you thrust that tallow candle in yonder, and for what were you lighting that piece of paper?'

It would have puzzled Machiavelli, or a London thief, to have explained this circumstance upon the instant. Mr. Gilbert Holm fell back upon the laws of property, and the freedom of the subject.

'I suppose a man can do what he likes on his own land, with his own wheat!'

'What! burn his ricks down when they are insured? Do not bandy words with me, sir. I don't know what your motive was, except that it was a bad one; but I know that you meditated a crime.'

'Heaven have mercy upon me!' cried the wretched man, suddenly falling upon his knees, and hiding his face in his hands, from which

the other had snatched the lantern. He was trembling in every limb, and had burst into tears; partly because he was really sorry for what he had done, and partly because the stimulus of the brandy he had taken to prime himself for his evil act had evaporated. Of this last fact the Curate was unaware; and, touched with his penitence and affright, he said, 'Heaven has already been merciful to you, Gilbert Holm, since it has moved me to keep silence about this night's work. Rise up, and follow me within doors.'

This the other did, like a dog, not only in the way of obedience, but from a certain dumb confidence in the other's leading, which his manner exhibited.

'You are very good to me, Mr. Dyneley,' he said, 'and I am not worthy of it. I have earned no service at your hands; on the contrary, I have done all I could to harm you.'

'To harm me?' answered the Curate, in surprise. 'I cannot think that.'

'No; nor would any one else, since you have always stood my friend. But oh, Mr. Dyneley, I was in the Devil's hands!'

'You were, some minutes ago, no doubt,' answered the other, cheerily; 'but let us hope you have escaped from them.'

'No, no, I don't mean *him*, but another, and a worse one. He that set me against you (though I did not wish it), and put me as a spy upon you, and told me to pick up all I could to your discredit in the village, and that if I could find nothing, it would be the worse for me.'

'Gilbert Holm,' said the Curate, gravely, 'you have been drinking; if you do not give that up, you are a lost man.'

'Drinking?—yes,' returned the wretched man, with a certain passionate desperation. '*You* would drink if you had become, body and soul, the slave of a villain. I did wrong, or I should never have put myself in his power; but my punishment is greater than is just, greater than I can bear.'

They had now reached the Curate's parlour,

and he had lit a candle, and stood regarding his late companion with incredulous amazement 'Here, take a glass of water, man; it will clear your brain,' he presently said; 'then sit down, and tell me all, if you really have anything to tell, and are not stark, staring mad.'

'Mad? It is, you may well say, a wonder that I am not mad, seeing what I have gone through, since—since the day I tried to cheat Sir Robert; and after all it was but a matter of a few trusses of hay.'

'You only tried, then?'

'Well, no, sir, I did cheat him; but not for ten times the value,' answered the other, naïvely, 'if I had but known, would I have fallen into that villain's hands.'

'You mean Mr. Walcot's? He found you out, then?'

'Yes, and he will find out that I have told you so; and then life will not be worth living any longer.'

'Never mind Mr. Walcot,' said the Curate, encouragingly; 'tell me all exactly as it

happened, and I promise you it shall be none the worse for you. Only it must be the truth.'

'Well, sir, I had lost money—no matter how, it had to be paid—and I had a bill to meet. And I sold the squire a rick and a half of hay for two ricks. That was the one dishonest thing I ever did in my life, though that devil laughed and sneered at me for saying so; —but there, I might as well have pleaded to a millstone.'

'You say *one* dishonest thing, Gilbert; what, then, do you call what you were going to do to-night?'

'Well, that was dishonest, too, sir; but then, thanks to you, I didn't do it. The fact is, I had another bill to meet next month—and a pretty big one. And if I sold my ricks I should have lost money, and, what is worse just now, my credit, too; whereas the insurance company—which is as rich as rich——'

'I see,' interrupted the other, drily. 'You need not make bad worse by defending it with

rotten arguments. Let us leave the rick question—though it is a most serious one—and confine ourselves to the crime you have actually committed. I may not feel called upon to take any steps against you in the one case, but it was Mr. Walcot's bounden duty to do so in the other.'

'Yes; but what steps? He makes a slave of me for his own purposes. And don't suppose that it is necessary to do anything wrong to cause him to grind one; why, there's poor Master Frank——'

'Ah! what about him?' put in the Curate, sharply; for the other had stopped suddenly, and looked over his shoulder, with a frightened air.

'Well, sir, I will tell you, although he murders me for it; for, mind you, he will find it out as he does everything. He is everywhere and can hear and see, like the Old One himself, just when one thinks one is most secure. Master Frank, I say, who never hurt a human being, nor yet an animal, nor did any wrong

so far as I know, is as much in Walcot's hands as I am. The poor child thinks he can send him to gaol for murder—though young Jem Groad is alive and well, and only rolled into the mill-stream because the bridge was slippery. I saw it all with my own eyes; only that devil says, "You shut your mouth, and let me deal with this matter my own way." And his way is, with old Groad's assistance, to keep that poor boy in a state of wretchedness from morning to night, for fear of his being punished for a crime that has never been committed. When I think of my being a party to that wickedness, and look at Master Frankie's hollow cheeks——'

'It is incredible, it is impossible!' interrupted the Curate, opening and shutting his hands, as he walked hastily to and fro. 'This man must be a devil.'

'No, sir; he is *the* Devil,' replied his companion. 'The Other One is not to be named in the same breath of sulphur.'

'But how could the gardener be induced to join such an abominable scheme?'

'Oh, Groad! well he is not a sweet thing in gardeners himself, sir; and it is very likely that Mr. Walcot has got him in some vice or another, like myself, and has only to turn a screw.'

'What on earth can be his motive for such villany?' murmured Dyneley, half aloud.

'Motive, sir! Why, what is the Other One's motive, if you come to that? Why, he likes to get people into his power, and make them miserable, of course; and the better people are, and the higher they are out of his reach, the more he hates them—that is why he detests *you*, Mr. Dyneley.'

'I will consider that a compliment, then,' said the Curate, drily, 'and owe him no grudge upon my own account. But this matter of Master Frank's must be looked to, and that at once. Now do you go to bed, Gilbert, and leave me to think out how it had best be done; and rest secure that you shall come to no harm for what you have done or said to-night.'

'Oh, Mr. Dyneley, how shall I ever repay you for your kindness—and your mercy!' cried the young farmer. 'I feel as if a load were taken off my chest already; I can breathe *free!*'

'Well; if you think you owe me anything, Gilbert, the way to please me best will be to forsake your greatest enemy.'

'Forsake him, sir! I would give him up to the hangman to-morrow; and, if there was no one else to do it, would volunteer to pull his legs.'

'It is not Mr. Walcot who is your greatest enemy, Gilbert,' returned the Curate, gravely; 'it is the spirit flask.'

'I'll never touch it again, sir, so help me——'

'Make no rash promises,' interrupted the Curate, solemnly. 'A good resolve quietly worked out is worth all the vows to which men call Heaven to witness. Good night, and God be with you.'

CHAPTER XI.

A CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK.

THERE were but a few hours of darkness left to the Curate, when he found himself alone in his parlour, and those he did not give up to their rightful claimant, Rest. The events of the preceding evening, joined to those of the night, afforded him topics of thought too important and exacting to admit of his taking repose. He sat with his elbows on his desk, and his head in his hands, endeavouring to think what was best to be done for the rescue of poor Frank, for the enfranchisement of Sir Robert from Walcot's evil influence, and in short for the whole state of Halcombe, groaning in secret under a despotic and cruel tyrant. As the Curate of the parish, he had, it was clear to

him, authority to resist oppression, and to expose deceit; but his relations with the tenants of the Hall were somewhat delicate, and the antagonism in which he had involuntarily placed himself to his late host necessarily increased the difficulties of his position. The devotion of the Baronet to Spiritualism was of no recent growth; but, though the members of his family knew and deplored it, they had not hitherto suspected the hold that it had taken of his very heart-strings. Something of this, however, from the unwonted displeasure he had displayed on the previous evening, Dyneley now guessed, and partly understood, too, what a fulcrum this superstition of Sir Robert's would afford to him who was the High Priest of it, whereby to turn his devotee to his own ends. There was no juster man alive than John Dyneley, but he had prudence withal; and, while burning to avenge the wrongs of the innocent, he did not forget to estimate what it might cost them to attempt it. The shortest and surest method of securing an ally, and a powerful one, was to tell

all to Lady Arden, whose sympathies would be at once enlisted on behalf of her son; but the Curate's knowledge of the influence exercised over the Baronet by Walcot made him reject this line of conduct; its effect would certainly be to place her in direct antagonism to her husband and his powerful friend; and it might well happen that the latter would prove too strong for her. From Gresham, again, he would be sure of sympathy; but the relations between that young man and Sir Robert were even now anything but satisfactory, thanks mainly to Walcot, who, the Curate was now persuaded, would stick at nothing to put him out of what little of his uncle's favour was still left to him, even to the destruction of his future prospects. The whole family at the Hall, indeed, might be most materially injured, if, after a battle royal, the victory should remain with this wily scoundrel, whose aims no man could fathom, though it was certain they were grasping and self-seeking.

Under these circumstances Dyneley resolved

to consult Frederic Mayne, a man on whose good impulses he could rely, and who had himself nothing to lose by any act of hostility to the common enemy. Accordingly, as he knew that gentleman's habit of early rising, he swallowed a hasty breakfast, and betook himself to the Hall, which he opportunely reached, as the ex-sailor was about to set forth on his usual morning ramble. The two young men greeted one another cordially, and, as they walked together towards the church upon the hill, Mayne at once expressed his apprehensions that in hitting out at 'that scoundrel Walcot' last night they had both committed themselves in the eyes of their host. 'For the first time since I've been in the house, Dyneley, Sir Robert forgot (I am afraid on purpose) to wish me his customary "Good-night."

'Very likely,' observed the Curate, gravely; 'and you may think yourself lucky if he doesn't wish you "Good-bye?"'

'What? You don't mean to say he would turn me out of the house?' answered Mayne,

reddening, 'just because I didn't believe in that beggar's being carried into the air? I should as soon believe in his going to Heaven!'

The Curate shook his head. 'Sir Robert regards his brother-in-law's honour as his own,' he said.

'Then he is the most modest man I know,' observed the other.

'He *is* modest, my dear sir; diffident of himself to the last degree, but having the utmost confidence in others—unhappily, whether they are worthy of it or not, as in this particular instance. In addition to his misplaced affection for his brother-in-law, there is this bond of Spiritualism between them.'

'Bond of fiddlesticks!' ejaculated the sailor. 'You don't suppose that the Mawworm—Walcot—believes in anything, human or divine, except himself?'

'Very likely not; but unfortunately Sir Robert believes in *him* implicitly. In listening to what I have to tell you, pray keep this in mind, and do not imagine, however plainly the

right may be on one side, or however capable of proof, that it will be an easy thing to establish it against this person's wishes. I shall ask your advice, and perhaps even your assistance, but I must exact a promise from you beforehand that you will take no steps in the matter I am about to disclose without my concurrence. If your interests or mine were alone concerned, our course would be plain enough ; but we have those of others—dear to both of us, I am sure —to consider, and they must not be imperilled.'

Mr. Mayne's face grew longer and longer during this exordium, and his air more grave ; an effect it was, perhaps, the other's intention to produce, for he knew by this time his companion's impulsive and hasty disposition.

'All right, Dyneley,' was the quiet rejoinder ; 'only just let me say one thing before you begin, out of respect for my own intelligence, and also because it's an immense satisfaction to utter it—that nothing, *nothing* you can tell me with respect to the goings on of Mr. Ferdinand

Walcot will astonish me, or come up to the very high opinion I have formed of his lying, meanness, selfishness, impudence, and general rascality. Thank you. Now go on.'

In spite of this ample assurance of his knowledge of Mr. Walcot's character, and of the immobility of his own feelings under any amount of revelation of it, long before the Curate had reached the end of his statement—which comprehended all that he had learnt from the lips of Gilbert Holm—Mr. Mayne began to exhibit signs of great excitement. Especially did he indulge in pulling down his shirt-cuffs to their fullest extent—an action termed in fashionable circles 'shooting his linen'—in doubling his fists, and squaring up at an imaginary foe, and in drawing deep breaths through his closed teeth, instead of through the usual channels. 'It is horrible,' he ejaculated, when all was told—'most horrible! To torture a delicate lad like Frankie—a mere child—why this brute must be a fiend. Oh! for

one quarter of an hour—or even ten minutes—alone with him, on a green sward, like this, out of the reach of the police. His own mother shouldn't know him—but there, he could never have *had* a mother. I know I have promised to do nothing without your concurrence; but, my dear Dyneley, you can't object to just ten minutes—only ten.'

There was such an alarming eagerness for action on the speaker's face that the Curate laid his strong hand upon his arm, and clutched it lest he should start off then and there, and 'interview' Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, in the manner indicated, before morning prayers.

'You must do nothing, Mayne,' he said; '*nothing* that can tend to excite Sir Robert against us, or rather against those it is our aim to protect.'

'Do you really think it *would* excite him?' pleaded the other, comically. 'I am quite sure Walcot would not have a word of complaint to make—not for a week to come at least. He

should not have a tooth in his mouth, nor a breath in his body. Only ten minutes, Dyneley!'

'Be quiet, be reasonable, my dear fellow,' answered the Curate, earnestly, 'or I shall regret having told you anything. Don't suppose I don't feel the same as you do, because I'm a clergyman; why, when I think of Frankie's little face, all furrowed by tears, as I have seen it lately, and then on that hypocrite's self-satisfied smug features, I could'—here he paused, allowing himself, it was evident by the gleam of his eyes, to dwell for a fleeting instant upon some picture of retribution—'yes, I could find some carnal satisfaction myself in having it out with him. But we must not think of our personal gratification in this matter,' he added, naïvely; 'we must first and foremost get the wrong righted, then afterwards, if it can be done (which is, however, more than doubtful), we may think of punishing the wrongdoer. In the first place, we must get Groad the elder to acknowledge his participation in this infamous

affair. Before going into court we must make certain of our witnesses.'

'Let us see the rascal at once,' said Mayne, impetuously.

'Well; that is where I want your assistance. Groad and I are not on good terms. He does not come to church on the plea of being a Presbyterian, upon which point I have not a word to say; only I have reason to know that he spends his kirk time in whisky drinking, and on that I did venture to put in a remonstrance which he has resented. A visit to him from me would at once arouse his antagonism, whereas you will at least start fair with him.'

'I see,' answered the other, assentingly. As a matter of fact he did not see that it was at all necessary to start 'fair' with the personage in question, but, on the contrary, was quite resolved to take every advantage of such a scoundrel chance might offer. His conviction was that the Curate was much too scrupulous in his mode of combating the antagonists they had to deal with, and he was secretly well

pleased with this opportunity of treating one of them, at least, in his own fashion. It was well understood by both Dyneley and himself that there was no time to lose, since, should the common enemy be forewarned of what was going on, he would be forearmed indeed; and Mayne at once repaired to the gardener's cottage.

As the family at the Hall were at that hour supposed to be still in their beds, or at family prayers (which Mr. Groad's scruples, of course, prevented him from attending), that personage would have considered it a positive waste of time (since there was nobody to look at him) to be pursuing his avocation in the garden; and the visitor found him accordingly seated in an arm-chair in his parlour, smoking a short pipe, and watching with a philosophic air his black parrot as it swung itself on the perch in its metal cage.

'Good morning, Groad,' said Mayne, in a loud voice, for the gardener was notoriously hard of hearing; nay, it was even said by some

that he was stone deaf when anything was said (such as complaints of his inefficiency) that he did not wish to hear.

'Mornin', sir,' answered the gardener, in less gruff tones than usual, and rising from his chair, by no means out of courtesy, but to suggest the idea that having now thoroughly thought out some scheme of cultivation of his master's territory, he was about to put it into practice.

'We are all for ourselves here,' croaked the parrot, rather inopportunely for the impression Mr. Groad wished to produce.

'A wholesome sentiment charmingly expressed,' observed Mr. Mayne; 'for if we don't look after ourselves, who will look after us, eh, Poll?'

There was something in the visitor's look and tone (though the latter was gay enough) which Mr. Groad did not seem to like; he put on his cap and took up a shovel.

'Well; I've got my green'us fire to look after,' he said. 'Poor folks can't afford to

waste their time in chatter like rich ones—and parrots.'

'You speak like a proverb, Mr. Groad. Do you believe in proverbs?'

'I dunno as I do, and I dunno as I don't.'

'A prudent reply. Perhaps my question was a little too general. Do you believe that honesty is the best policy?'

The gardener's well-tanned cheek turned to a deeper shade. 'You had better ask the minister,' he answered, contemptuously, and moved towards the door.

'I *have* asked the minister, and I have come from him to you,' replied the other, regarding him attentively; 'he is a kind man, and pities you from the bottom of his heart.'

'It's my belief you take your whusky before breakfast,' growled Mr. Groad; but, although his voice was gruff, the other noticed that his eyes showed much disquiet.

'Well; if I do, it's only what *you* do, my good fellow.'

'Not a drop has passed my lips this blessed morn,' ejaculated the gardener, solemnly.

'Then you keep it in your mouth all night, and that's what makes you smell of it so confoundedly,' was Mayne's unexpected rejoinder. 'Now, look here, don't put yourself in a passion; a religious man like you should never give way to temper, especially in such a time of affliction. Think of your poor murdered bairn.'

'The man's mad,' muttered the gardener, grasping his shovel.

'But you *have* lost poor Jem, have you not?' pursued the other, earnestly.

'Not as I knows on.'

'Well; anyhow you very nearly lost him. He was half-drowned in the mill-stream, was he not?'

'I'm off to the green'us,' said Mr. Groad, evasively. The subject that had been so unexpectedly broached had been strictly tabooed to him, by Mr. Walcot's orders, so he took refuge in his physical infirmity.

Mayne quietly placed himself between his companion and the door.

'Then your Jem lied, did he, when he said that Master Frank had pushed him in?'

'We are all for ourselves here,' said the parrot.

'Quite right, Poll. A lie is nothing,' continued Mayne, airily; 'but a lie that is made up between two persons—such as a father and his son—to accuse another wrongfully, is in the eye of the law a conspiracy. The punishment for that is penal servitude. Look here, John Groad, you be careful; don't you say anything that may get you into trouble.'

The speaker had exactly hit the difficulty that was agitating Mr. Groad's brain, and this expression of solicitude for his welfare shot to the very core of it. He knew that some such phrase was used to prisoners when they were taken into custody, and in his guilty mind he already felt the handcuffs about his wrists. The charge he had made against poor Frankie he had committed to writing under Mr.

Walcot's orders; and now, as it seemed to him, that gentleman had turned round upon him, and was about to sacrifice him to justice.

'I can't hear a word you say,' murmured Mr. Groad; with a face, however, that much belied his words.

'That's a pity,' observed his companion, drily. 'It is not necessary, however, to *hear* the judge—when he gives you "seven years." The sentence has just the same effect in writing.'

At this moment the door opened, and in came Jem Groad, with an armful of potatoes. His cunning eyes roved from his father to his visitor, with an air of much suspicion and alarm.

'Go to your bed-room, lad, till I call you,' growled the gardener, angrily.

'Not so fast,' cried Mayne, seizing him by the arm; 'it is only fair that Jem should have his chance of escaping prison walls, and bread and water, and whipping. If he still sticks to it that Master Frank pushed him in, well and

good, the judge will decide it; but if he makes a clean breast of it, there will be no disposition on the part of the prosecution to press hard upon him.'

'He didn't do it,' cried Jem, suddenly dropping the potatoes and falling on his knees; 'I slipped off the bridge of myself, and nobody didn't push me. Only father and Mr. Walcot —they made me say as 'twas Master Frank.'

There was a long silence, which the parrot was the first to break with his monotonous cry, 'We are all for ourselves here.'

At this repetition of what it was now but too evident was the family motto, the old gentleman muttered a sullen imprecation. 'The boy's a liar when he says that I had anything to do with it. It was Muster Walcot's business—not mine, nor Jem's—from first to last. Of course if he now thinks different, well and good, so far as I'm concerned; but I am not a-going to be made a scapegoat of.'

There was a certain smothered indignation

about the old man's tones which did not escape his visitor's keen ear.

'If you rely upon Mr. Walcot to get you out of this,' he said, 'you are trusting to a reed, and a rotten one.'

'You don't mean to say as he's been and rounded on me?' cried the old man, passionately.

Here was a difficulty, which also involved a nice point in morals. Mayne could hardly say Walcot had betrayed him, and yet if he answered 'No,' the man might prefer to stick to his patron and his story. He took a middle course.

'Does Mr. Walcot look to you, Mr. Groad, like one who, being himself in danger, never peaches?'

'Did he tell about *them?*' interrupted the other, with his hand to his ear, and speaking with great vehemence. 'Has he told Sir Robert about the peaches?'

Mr. Mayne nodded.

'Then I've done with him,' cried the old

man, bitterly. 'He took his oath as he'd never tell if I only served him. There was only ten dozen of 'em, as he saw himself, Master Mayne; and they was the first I ever sent to Covent Garden.'

'That is as it may be, Mr. Groad,' replied Mayne, coldly; 'but I think I may promise that no steps will be taken to your detriment, if only you tell the truth, as Jem has done, about this matter of Master Frank. In the mean time, keep a quiet tongue in your head; and if Mr. Walcot comes here, be careful not to let him know I've been before him, or that any one knows, beside you two, of your having taken too much upon yourself in the way of perquisites.'

'Yes, sir, yes, that was it!' cried the gardener, clasping his hands; 'it was just overstepping my rights, though that villain Walcot called it thieving. I'll be thankful, indeed, if you'll say a good word for me. As for him, I will do what you like that may do him an ill turn.'

'And I'll say what I knows,' said Jem, with clumsy fervour; 'and more, too, sooner than go to prison.'

'Quite right,' said Mr. Mayne, approvingly. 'You are a chip of the old block, you are, Jem. Good morning.'

'Good morning, sir,' echoed father and son, in servile key.

'We are all for ourselves here,' chimed in the parrot.

CHAPTER XII.

CHECK AND COUNTER-CHECK.

By noon that day, with such goodwill did Mr. Frederic Mayne pursue his part in what he subsequently spoke of as the Great Rebellion, that he had obtained Mr. Groad's signature to a brief narrative describing the plot he had entered into against Master Frank Nicoll's peace of mind, at Mr. Walcot's suggestion, and acknowledging its falsehood. To this Gilbert Holm had also added in writing his corroborative evidence, in stating which his remarks upon the arch conspirator did not certainly err upon the side of leniency. The document, on the whole, as it seemed both to Mayne and Dyneley, was proof sufficient to carry conviction to any mind—however warped

and prejudiced—and with it the strongest loathing and disgust for the offender. It was, in short, a bill of indictment against one Ferdinand Walcot, setting forth his gross abuse of the powers entrusted to him, as the administrator of Sir Robert's affairs, in the suborning of witnesses, whose own misdeeds against his employer he had condoned on condition of their becoming his instruments. The object, too, of this base conspiracy being an innocent child, left nothing to be desired for raising the flame of honest indignation in any breast—far less in that of one so kind and just as the judge to whom they were about to make appeal. Had the two young men entertained the least doubt of the result, they would, having thus got up the case, like a firm of attorneys (except that they worked for nothing), have placed it in the hands of Lady Arden herself as their counsel and advocate. But it was their object to spare her all the pain and distress of mind they could, and it was their hope and natural expectation that by the time she came to know

of the cruelty and wrong practised on her little son, the chief delinquent would have been dismissed her roof with ignominy. So it was arranged that one or both of them should seek an interview with Sir Robert without informing any one else—not excepting even George Gresham—of their intentions. They judged that the less the members of the family at the Hall were mixed up with so grave an accusation, the less poignantly Sir Robert would feel the exposure of his brother-in-law; and they especially wished that he should not associate them in his mind in days to come with a proceeding which, however necessary, must needs be most unwelcome to him. In the end, and for this same reason as regarded the Curate, Mayne persuaded the former to place the whole affair in his own hands, which, being thus brought under Sir Robert's notice by a comparative stranger, should be rendered as little unpalatable to him as was possible.

It had become not unusual of late for the master of the Hall to absent himself from the

rest of the family till late in the day; he took his morning meal in his study, to which, as we have said, there was an access from his dressing-room, and left his *alter ego*, Mr. Walcot, to represent him in matters not only temporal but spiritual—that is to say, at family prayers. It had happened so upon the day after the little dinner party; nor did he put in an appearance, as was his wont, even at luncheon. Lady Arden had explained that her husband was indisposed, but seemed disinclined to enter into further particulars. His manner, though still kind, had indeed been more *distrait* to her than ever that morning, while his wan and haggard air had for the first time given her real cause for anxiety. He had dropped a hint, too, of the probability of his going abroad for a few months for the benefit of his health; and when she had offered to accompany him, he had declined, though with an ample acknowledgment of the self-sacrifice on her part which such a proposal had involved. What annoyed her was that, by way of allaying her anxiety, he had said

something of the safe hands in which he would find himself, as though his intended companion, Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, had been little short of all in all to him.

'Is Sir Robert well enough this afternoon, Lady Arden, to admit of my having a few words with him?' Mayne had asked, unconscious of this rift in the domestic lute. And her ladyship had replied, with a touch of tartness, 'I really can't say, Mr. Mayne; you had better apply to Mr. Walcot, who has been closeted with him all the morning.'

Here was tinder, Mayne saw at once, if he only chose to apply a spark—one hint of what he had got written down on the paper in his breast-pocket—but, mindful of the Curate's warning, he took no advantage of the opportunity. To ask for Mr. Walcot's good offices in the matter was, under the circumstances, out of the question; so he wrote a few lines to Sir Robert, asking permission to speak with him in private upon an important matter, and gave them to Parker, the butler.

That dignitary returned in a few minutes with word that his master would see Mr. Mayne, and at once ushered him into the study, where Sir Robert sat at his desk, with Walcot standing by his side.

It was not a pleasant errand for Mr. Mayne, under any circumstances, to beard, as it were, the lion in his den, but it was ten times more embarrassing thus to find his jackal in immediate attendance on him.

Sir Robert rose, and bowed with a cold smile, but without taking the hand that his visitor stretched out to him.

'I regret to hear that you are unwell, sir,' said the latter, firmly. 'I should not have intruded on you at such a time, if what I wished to say to you was not of great importance.'

'I am quite well enough, Mr. Mayne, to hear anything you may have to say to me,' was the frigid response.

'My communication, however, is of a strictly private nature,' returned Mayne, with a significant glance at Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, who

returned it with a half-indifferent, half-amused air, which incensed the other exceedingly. It seemed to say, 'I don't know what you are come about, my young friend; but you had much better save your breath to cool your porridge, or for some other purpose of utility. It is no use wasting it against *me*.'

'I have no secrets from Ferdinand Walcot,' observed Sir Robert, laying his hand upon his brother-in-law's wrist affectionately.

'He has, however, some secret of his own which he takes care to keep from *you*,' replied Mayne, boldly. 'I tell him to his face, and in your presence, that he has deceived and tricked you.'

Sir Robert would have risen from his seat but for the heavy hand that Walcot placed upon his shoulder, while at the same time he whispered something in his ear. As it was, the Baronet regarded his guest with looks, not of incredulity—for their significance was far beyond that—but of amazement and indignation.

'Here are the proofs of what I say in writing,' continued Mayne, 'signed by the persons used by Mr. Walcot as his tools, namely, John Groad and Gilbert Holm. With their assistance, secured by his knowledge of certain dishonest acts committed against yourself, and dishonestly concealed by him from you——yes, sir, you may read with your own eyes'—for Sir Robert held out a trembling hand for the document—'while he has used the guilty for his own ends, he has not hesitated to sacrifice youth and innocence.' There was a sharp tearing sound, and the paper was rent asunder as he spoke, and cast by Sir Robert contemptuously upon the floor.

'It will take far more, sir, than the testimony of two such men as you have named, with your own to boot,' cried he, indignantly, 'to make me think one thought that has disgrace or deceit in it regarding Ferdinand Walcot. He is above the reach of calumny, nor will I insult him so far as to read what slander may have designed against him.'

'To be thus wilfully deaf and blind, Sir Robert,' urged Mayne, earnestly, but not without a touch of pity as he caught the look of misplaced tenderness and confidence the other had bestowed on his companion, 'is to belie your nature, which is honest, and just, and kind. Do not let that man there warp it. At least investigate this matter with fairness, as though it concerned another, not yourself.'

'If it concerned another, sir,' answered the Baronet, haughtily, 'it is possible—though even then I should not stoop to notice it—that I might bid you take it to some other judge; but since, according to your own showing, it only concerns me and mine, I should scorn myself were I to pay any, the least, regard to it. My only hope, as regards yourself, sir, is, that in making so infamous a charge you have been made the catspaw by some more designing person, whose name, however, I will not ask you to disclose. Tell him only this from me, that in traducing my dear friend and relative, he is doing *him* no disservice in my eyes, but

only making himself contemptible and disgraced in them.'

'I do not know to whom you allude, sir,' replied Mayne, gravely. 'I came here of my own free will, and solely out of the love of justice implanted in every honest man. Is it possible that you refuse to listen to me, or to ask a single question which may elicit right from wrong?'

For a moment Sir Robert hesitated; this appeal to his natural sense of justice was not without its force. As he was about to reply, Mr. Walcot whispered a few words into his ear.

'True, true,' he replied. 'Since it seems you are so anxious to be interrogated, Mr. Mayne, may I ask you, leaving this mighty accusation where it lies' (and he pointed contemptuously to the ground), 'whether it is true that you are abetting my friend and nephew, George Gresham, in his courtship of Miss Elise Hurt, being yourself as well aware as I am that his word is pledged to my niece Evelyn?'

'Indeed, sir, I cannot see,' returned Mayne,

with a faint smile—for he felt the importance of the admission sought to be extorted from him—'how it is possible that I can abet my friend in any such enterprise.'

'Ah! then you own, at least, that he meditates it,' put in Sir Robert, quickly. 'Come, you are in love with truth and right, it seems; answer this question fairly, Does George woo this girl, my daughters' governess, or not?'

'I do not think it is necessary, Arden, to ask that question,' observed Walcot, speaking aloud for the first time. 'You have only to read the gentleman's face. He cannot, of course, deny the fact of your nephew's disloyalty. His views of wooing, however, may be somewhat different from those entertained by honourable men, to judge by what has come under my notice in his own case. Up to this time I have hesitated to expose him—not, I admit, for his own sake, but because I knew the pain it would cause a man like you to find his nephew's friend and chosen companion abusing the hospitality of your roof. You have an

orphan girl beneath it, Arden, the attendant upon your daughters, whose position and office one would have thought would have protected her from the designs of any man, but whom this *gentleman* here has made the object of his attentions.'

'That is surely impossible!' exclaimed Sir Robert. 'To whom do you refer?'

'You may well ask him,' observed Mayne, contemptuously. 'He has told a falsehood.'

'I have told the truth,' answered Walcot, calmly. 'If Mr. Mayne has really that desire he has just now expressed to elicit right from wrong, let him deny the charge I have made against him in the presence of her whom it is no fault of his if she may not be termed his victim.'

'This is too much,' cried Mayne, his long-suppressed indignation getting at last the better of him. 'Your impudence passes all bounds, though neither it nor your lies, nor the malice of them, astonish me. I should scorn, Sir Robert, to give you aught but my bare word in reply

to an accusation so infamous; but for the sake of this young woman herself, and her reputation, which this man has not hesitated to sully, I accept his challenge. Let me meet her, here before you, face to face.'

With that smile of amused assurance still upon his lip, which acted on Frederic Mayne like the dart of the matador upon the bull, Mr. Walcot answered, 'Let it be so,' and touched the bell at his right hand.

'It is unnecessary, Ferdinand; have I not *your* word?' said Sir Robert, gently.

'Nay, Arden; since the gentleman talks of proofs, let his desire be gratified. Parker, Sir Robert wishes to see Annabel Spence.'

And the butler left the room with astonishment depicted on his stately features.

'One word, Sir Robert, before this girl appears,' said Mayne, earnestly. 'It is probable that this man here——'

'My brother-in-law,' put in the Baronet, coldly.

'Unhappily he does stand in that relationship

to you; but if he were of your own blood, it would still be necessary to speak the truth of him. I say it is probable that he will seek to twist a certain circumstance to his advantage, by making it appear a premeditated act, instead of, what it was, an unfortunate accident. The other morning, when strolling before breakfast in the garden, I happened to step into the summer-house with my cigar, and to my great surprise found that it had a tenant—the young woman in question, of whose very name I was at that time ignorant, and with whom I had never before exchanged a syllable in my life. I did speak a few commonplace words to her, to which I have no recollection that she answered anything; and on leaving the arbour I met Mr. Walcot, to whom I then explained the matter as I do now.'

Mr. Walcot gave a little laugh, by no means in the way of corroboration; it seemed to say, 'Of all the clumsy scoundrels that I have yet come across, this person is surely the most unfortunate as well as the most depraved.'

As he did so, the door opened, and in walked the compromised young lady. What was unlucky for her, in the eyes of the superficial observer, was the vulgar brilliancy of her costume. Her flaunting little cap, set upon a mountain of light brown hair, was adorned with cherry-coloured ribands; her dress was blue, and disclosed a margin of petticoat trimmed with that exquisite lace which is sold for threepence-halfpenny the yard. Her face, however, was without a trace of colour; her usually bright black eyes were softened by the presence of tears, and she trembled in every limb.

'Perhaps you would like to ask this young person a few questions yourself, Sir Robert,' said Mr. Walcot.

The Baronet shook his head; his eyes were fixed on the new comer with a look of disfavour that almost amounted to loathing. 'How could I ever have thought this girl resembled my sainted Madeline?' was what he was saying to himself. And, indeed, Miss Spence was far from looking her best, whether as respected her attire

or the expression of her face, which was downcast, and even guilty. She had taken up a corner of her apron, and was applying it to her eyes with persistent vigour.

'Annabel Spence,' said Mr. Walcot, speaking with great distinctness, 'Sir Robert has sent for you not in anger, but in sincere sorrow, with respect to an imprudence into which he believes you have been led by another person more to blame than yourself. No harm is intended to you, if only you will speak the truth; the questions which I shall put to you are few and simple. You will be caused no unnecessary pain, but they must be answered. When you met Mr. Mayne the other morning in the terrace summer-house, was it by design on your part?'

Annabel began to sob, and to apply her apron to her eyes more vigorously than ever.

'Nun—nun—no, sir.'

'Very good; we are glad to hear it. But was it by design on his? I mean, were you there by his appointment?'

'Yes, sir.'

Mayne started, and looked at the girl with supreme amazement.

'You hear her,' said Sir Robert.

'Yes, sir, I hear her; but her words are not her own words; they have been put into her mouth beforehand by that man. Unhappy girl! you know not what misfortunes you may be drawing down on other heads by so infamous a falsehood; as for me, I care nothing for such slanders. But I charge you, for the sake of others who have been kind to you beneath this roof, and whose bread you eat, to tell the truth, and shame—this villain! Do you dare to assert, so far from having appointed to meet you, that I ever spoke one word to you before that morning, or that I said anything on that occasion which you might not repeat now?'

'The girl must not be intimidated,' exclaimed Mr. Walcot, sternly; for Annabel was sobbing bitterly.

'Quite right, quite right,' assented Sir Robert. 'For my part, I am quite satisfied as to this matter; but I will ask one question

more, the answer to which will include everything. Did this gentleman here ever address you in unbecoming language?'

'Nun—nun—no, sir.'

'I mean, Annabel, in language unbecoming one in his station to one in yours—the language of affection?'

She looked up as if by a great effort, her fine eyes swimming in tears: 'Oh, yes, sir, many times.'

'That will do; you may leave the room,' said Sir Robert; then added, with but little less of peremptoriness, 'and you, Mr. Mayne, may leave my house as soon as you can conveniently do so. And I must beg that in the meantime you hold no converse with any ladies of my family, whom your conduct has insulted beyond expression.'

It was in Mayne's mind to warn Sir Robert even then that a day would surely come when he would know how he had been duped and deceived, and would recognise the true character of the man in whom he misplaced such

confidence; but, after all, this would only be assertion, and what would that avail when even the proofs he would have brought forward had been treated with indifference and contempt? Moreover, it must be confessed that Mr. Mayne had been a good deal discomposed by two experiences that had happened within the last five minutes; he had been accused and found guilty of conduct unbecoming a gentleman, and had found himself compelled to contradict a lady.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN COUNCIL.

If it had not been for the serious consequences likely to arise, as regarded others, from his defeat, Frederic Mayne's strong sense of humour would have almost caused him to enjoy his own discomfiture at the hands of his enemy. Never certainly—though he had belonged to a midshipman's mess—had such amazing impudence been exhibited within his experience as that displayed by Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, who, so far from bowing to fate in the shape of a charge of subornation and dishonesty, supported by written proof, had sublimely soared into the region of Public Prosecutor, and persuaded 'the Court' to dismiss his accuser with disgrace and reprobation. Conscious as he was of his inno-

cence, and of the cruel wrong that Sir Robert's incredulity had done him, Mayne did not for an instant contemplate disobeying his host's command that he should leave his roof, and hold no converse with the ladies of his household. In *his* eyes the young man felt that he was guilty of the offence laid to his charge, and, being so, that it would be an outrage on the hospitality which he had so long enjoyed to disregard Sir Robert's sentence, however unjust and harsh, to avoid meeting any of its inmates; so he took his way to the Manor Farm, where he well knew the Curate would be awaiting with impatience the result of his late interview. To his great relief he also found here his friend George Gresham, whom Dyneley, overcome with a sense of responsibility, had, after the other's departure on his eventful errand, taken into his confidence.

'Well; what has happened?' ejaculated both young men, rising eagerly from their chairs as the emissary presented himself in the Curate's parlour.

'Nothing—— At least except to *me*,' replied Mayne, with an air half-crestfallen, half-comic. 'I have been tried by court-martial, found guilty, and turned out of the ship.'

'What! you don't mean to say that my uncle didn't believe you?' exclaimed Gresham, incredulously.

'Most certainly I do; he will believe nobody except Mr. Ferdinand Walcot.'

'But the evidence, the written evidence,' urged the Curate; 'no one could get over *that*.'

'Yes, one could, if one tore up and refused to read it, which is just what Sir Robert did,' was the quiet reply.

'But my uncle must be bewitched!' cried Gresham, angrily. 'This Walcot must be the Devil himself!'

'That is Gilbert Holm's view,' returned Mayne, coolly, 'and upon my life I begin to think it a just one. If you had heard the villain quote, if not Scripture, yet morality, for his own ends, as I did, you would think so too.'

'What on earth had *he* to do with morality?'

exclaimed Gresham, with contemptuous impatience.

'Well; a good deal,' said Mayne, with a laugh which, to say truth, was a little forced. The subject of Miss Spence was an unpleasant one. He knew that his audience would acquit him of all serious intention of wrong-doing; but there had been something even in the Curate's manner, when he had described that arbour scene, which smacked of incredulity. Young men are so hard upon young men.

'Instead of replying to *my* charges, he accused me of a flirtation with your fair cousins' ladies' maid. Dyneley knows the circumstances on which the accusation was founded, and, without going into them, I think that you know *me* quite well enough to acquit me of such a charge.'

'Of course,' said Gresham. 'Dyneley has been telling me, however, that he feared this fellow would take some advantage of your little imprudence.'

'There was no little imprudence,' interrupted Mayne, with irritation; 'it was a pure accident my meeting with the girl in the arbour.'

'No doubt it was; but you might have indulged, perhaps, in some innocent chaff, which, by some perversion——'

'You are altogether wrong, Gresham; I give you my word of honour.'

'Yes, yes,' said Dyneley; 'there was really nothing in it, though of course the circumstances were suspicious, and in malicious hands easily capable of misinterpretation.'

'Well, they *were* misrepresented,' continued Mayne. 'And you may imagine Sir Robert's indignation at the suggestion of my having so misbehaved myself.'

'I should have insisted on the girl herself being called to prove my innocence,' observed the Curate. 'I can understand your wishing to spare her feelings, but in so serious a matter——'

'She *was* called,' put in Mayne, with an

uncomfortable laugh; 'and, would you believe it—suborned, no doubt, like the rest of them, by that scoundrel—she said I met her by appointment, and that I had made love to her more than once.'

There was a total silence, save for a single ejaculation of Mr. Gresham's. 'Oh, by Jove!' he said, in a hushed voice.

'Very good, gentlemen,' observed Mayne, bitterly; 'it seems, then, that you are of Sir Robert's opinion and Mr. Walcot's!'

'No, no,' cried the Curate, eagerly.

'My dear fellow, how can you be so foolish?' remonstrated Gresham, convulsed with suppressed mirth. 'Of course, we believe your word. Only the idea of this young person—your chief witness—not only breaking down under cross-examination, but going over to the other side, and in so delicate a manner; it is really very funny.' And the young man threw himself back into his chair, and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks.

'I am glad you are amused, Gresham,'

observed Mayne, severely. He was very angry, and the more so because he suspected the Curate of maintaining his own gravity only by the greatest efforts. 'There is very little else to amuse you in this affair, I do assure you. I was not the only person charged with flirtation. Mr. Walcot accused you point blank of making love to Miss Hurt, just as he did me in the case of the waiting-maid.'

'The insolent hound!' exclaimed Gresham, sobered in an instant. 'Did he dare to breathe a word against Elise?'

'Well; he was not very complimentary in his innuendoes, so far as you were concerned, and that's the truth. However, what moved your uncle against you was the fact of your having departed from your allegiance as regards another.'

'I never promised it. She knows I never did.'

'The point is, my dear Gresham, that your uncle supposed it was promised. When he asked me, "Could I deny that you paid

attentions to Miss Hurt?" and I was silent, I saw he was deeply angered. Yet since I was not born blind, and have been under the same roof with you and her so long, what *could* I say, Gresham?'

'The truth,' answered the other, impetuously. 'Of course you were right in what you did if you suspected my attachment; but as for me, I will tell him this very day that I mean to make Elise my wife. Evelyn, God bless her, though I love her as my own sister, never cared for me in that way. No uncle's wishes could make her do so. He is neither so unjust nor so unkind as to resent the instincts of nature. It is true I have endeavoured to conceal from him my affection for Elise; that was a piece of cowardice, I own, unworthy of me, and still more so of her: it was only at my urgent entreaty that she consented to it, and even then unwillingly. Oh! if you but knew that girl's nobility of spirit; her undaunted courage in the very jaws of death; her simplicity and frankness—if I had only let her

be frank! Yes; I will go to him at once and tell him all.'

The young man had risen from his seat, and taken a quick stride towards the door, ere the Curate could lay hand upon his arm.

'Are you mad, Gresham,' he cried, 'thus to rush upon destruction? Do you not see that Walcot has first dropped poison into your uncle's ears, and then closed them. To an appeal from you he would be worse than deaf. We must waste no more strength in individual struggles against the common enemy. We must make common cause against him. Lady Arden herself, nay, even the young ladies, must be with us, not excepting little Frank. Such a weight of feeling, backed by the testimony which this man Walcot has not destroyed—for Holm, at least, is a living voice we can rely upon—will surely be irresistible. Only we must do nothing rashly, nor without due concert, however strong our cause; and however confident, and justly confident, we may feel in Sir Robert's love of truth and justice, it is certain that one

who loves neither has for the present obtained almost absolute power over him.'

'But how the devil has he done it?' inquired Gresham, with impatient irritation.

'The Devil only knows,' replied Mayne; 'but he *has* done it. He has him body and soul; so that every one in Sir Robert's power is also at this man's tender mercy. Dyneley is quite right, you have got your work cut out for you.'

'Still,' said the Curate, 'if we can only gain Sir Robert's ear——'

'You will find this man sitting "squat" by the side of it, just as the Fiend does in "Paradise Lost." Sir Robert's reply will be like the notice of a circular, "all applications to be made to the secretary." You have not seen what I have seen. By Jingo, if I were his next of kin, as you are, Gresham, I would take out a writ *de lunatico inquirendo*.'

'You are not serious, I am sure, Mayne,' said Gresham, reprovingly. 'I should be ungrateful, indeed, no matter what course my

uncle may think proper to pursue, if I ever treated him with aught but respect.'

'Very good; you will act as you think proper. But as for me, I confess my sense of obligation to Sir Robert Arden is somewhat less than it was a few hours ago.'

'You have certainly been treated very ill,' said Dyneley. 'However, it is impossible but that the right will come uppermost and justice be done, and that within the next twenty-four hours. In the meantime, as you think it proper to absent yourself from Sir Robert's roof till all is explained, take up your quarters here with me.'

'Not I,' answered Mayne, resolutely, 'though I thank you all the same for your hospitality. I dare not trust myself within sight and touch of Ferdinand Walcot. If I were once to permit myself the luxury of a few words in private with him—dear me, I can't bear to think of it—in five minutes (or I have forgotten my training) that shark would be a jelly fish. I suppose I can procure a horse and

trap in the village without trespassing upon the Hall stables for them?'

'Yes, yes,' said the Curate, thoughtfully. 'I can drive you over to Mirton in the dog-cart myself at once, if you must go. Perhaps it is better you should do so, for the sake of the ladies. If any domestic dissension should arise, your presence would, without doubt, render it still more distressing.'

Notwithstanding his sense of the danger that threatened the household at the Hall, and his sincere regret at Mayne's departure under such untoward circumstances, the Curate was by no means in a depressed condition. He had a firm belief that matters would in the end be set right, and then—being human—he could not but feel a certain elation in the knowledge that had just been imparted to him, for the first time for certain, that not only had Gresham given up all intention of aspiring to Evelyn's hand, but that Evelyn herself had never encouraged him to do so.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EMBARRASSING REPAST.

How often it happens that though misfortunes occur to us in sufficient plenty, the one especial thing to which we have looked forward with prescient pain is spared us! Something else, quite unlooked for, may happen to vex us, but not *that* in the expectation of which we may have passed sleepless nights and anxious days. [Wherein lies the folly of the despondent, half of whose miseries in life are caused by their misplaced apprehensions.] Thus the incubus that sat upon George Gresham from the moment he had heard Dyneley's tale of Walcot's wrong-doings, and which grew heavier with every word of Mayne's supplementary narrative, was the thought, 'And I shall have to meet this

scoundrel at the dinner-table to-night, and be obliged not only to keep silence as to what has happened, but to be civil to him.' There was no time before the family meal to lay before Lady Arden the facts of the case, or to devise any plan of attack with her against the common enemy; and to attack him without a plan would be, it was now evident, to court defeat and discomfiture. Gresham foresaw that his own future was threatened, that his whole life was in danger of being marred, by this man's hatred and subtlety; but he was young and sanguine, and, to do him justice, felt even more keenly the humiliating position in which Lady Arden and the girls were placed than his own not unmerited disgrace. He had invited his uncle's wrath by his own duplicity; it was the natural punishment of his own cowardice in not having confessed his love for Elise; but Lady Arden and her children had done nothing to deserve the loss of Sir Robert's confidence and favour, and he justly feared the worst—or something, at least, that was very bad—for them. Sir

Robert would never have shut his ears to such a tale as Mayne had had to tell him, concerning the persecution of poor innocent Frank, had he not surrendered his judgment to Walcot's keeping; and if Lady Arden's personal advocacy of the cause of her own son should fail, it would be a sign, indeed, that the whole family, and their future prospects, were at this scoundrel's mercy. In any case, it was clear that their position was perilous; and the coming appeal to the master of the Hall would be a crucial test of it. There was no alternative between Walcot's being kicked out of the house, and its present inmates remaining there in a subordinate position.

It was with a heavy heart, then, that Gresham dressed for dinner that night, and descended to the drawing-room; and yet, as we have said, it was filled quite as much with indignation as with sorrow. He felt that whatever he should eat in the presence of this subtle villain would disagree with him, and that he should need all his self-control to prevent his

'saying things' that would have a similar effect upon Mr. Ferdinand Walcot's digestion. Moreover, it would not be an easy task, in the presence of that gentleman and Sir Robert, to invent a reason for Mayne's sudden departure, without leave-taking, from that hospitable roof. It was probable that whatever he said would be accepted in silence; but if it was not so, if anything was uttered by Walcot to Frederic Mayne's disparagement as a gentleman, Gresham was quite resolute to give him the lie.

Mr. Gresham was certainly not in a frame of mind that would be approved of by the faculty as one in which to sit down to a late dinner.

To his great surprise, he perceived at once, by the countenances of the three ladies, that something had happened to put *them* also in an abnormal state. He was late, of course, by a few minutes, but neither Sir Robert nor his brother-in-law were with the rest, as usual.

'Your uncle is unwell, George,' explained Lady Arden, 'and will dine in his own room.'

She did not even mention Mr. Walcot; but he understood at once that that gentleman was keeping his host company, and also that Lady Arden disapproved of it.

'We shall, indeed, be a small party then,' said Gresham, 'for I am sorry to say Mayne has received news which has compelled him to leave us at a moment's notice. He begged me to make a thousand apologies for him, for you had all gone for a walk (this was fortunately true) when he got the message, and Dyneley took him over to Mirton in the dog-cart to catch the coach at once.'

'We are all sorry to lose Mr. Mayne,' said Lady Arden, quietly. Gresham felt that this would not have been her way of receiving such a piece of intelligence under ordinary circumstances; but, on the other hand, her expression of goodwill showed she had heard nothing —or at least not what he feared—to his friend's disadvantage.

'I am sure he regrets the necessity of his departure as much as is possible,' said Gresham,

earnestly. 'I am not at liberty just now to state the reason of it, but I will explain it to-morrow, Lady Arden. In the meantime I am sure you will acquit him of any rudeness.'

'I don't think Mr. Mayne could be rude if he tried,' observed Evelyn.

'You are right, Evy,' answered Gresham, gratefully. 'He has too kind a heart.'

'I am sure, dear Baba will miss him exceedingly,' said Milly. There was nothing surprising in the Great Baba's views, which were always weighty, if not final, being alluded to on this subject more than on any other; yet there was a blush on Milly's cheek, and an embarrassment in her tone; which did not escape Gresham's notice, and which under other circumstances would certainly have provoked his raillery. He was sure that the girl felt sorrow for his friend's departure on her own account, and thought he knew why she affected personally to ignore it; but there was something in her manner and that of her sister, as he had observed in Lady Arden herself, which was both

unexpected and unaccountable. He had certainly looked for some surprise as well as regret to have been expressed at this bad news; but they were silent. The reason of which he guessed to be that the minds of his companions were already occupied by some other event of greater consequence, and, to judge by their faces, of sadder import.

'Mr. Mayne's departure is a sad break-up to our little party, no doubt,' said Lady Arden, with the air of one who dismisses an unpleasant subject; 'but there are worse breakings-up in store for us, I fear.'

To this Gresham answered nothing: first, because he saw that the observation made the girls look very uncomfortable; and secondly, because he did not understand its meaning. Lady Arden often talked, when despondent and dyspeptic, about her own 'breaking-up,' and of her doubts whether she herself would be long 'spared' to them—in supposed allusion to the celestial beings who were yearning for her company in another sphere. Fortunately the

conversation was here cut short by the presence of Parker, the butler, who announced that dinner was served, in a tone so especially unctuous that Gresham felt more certain than ever that some family catastrophe had taken place—a conviction which was not weakened by the behaviour of the company at table.

His own attempts to lift the conversation could not be expected under the circumstances to be very effective, and no one seconded them. Lady Arden uttered more sighs than words, and the girls were almost as silent; while the three collectively ate about as much as three sparrows, without any of the liveliness displayed by those energetic little creatures over their meals.

Once Gresham attempted to take the bull by the horns—to evoke, as it were, a ministerial explanation—by hoping that there had been no serious change for the worse in his uncle's health since the morning; to which Lady Arden had replied, stiffly, 'I see no marked change in him myself, but I am assured that there is such by one whose word in this house is law.'

'It isn't Gospel, though, nor anything like it,' answered Gresham, sharply.

'To dispute it, however, is to be worse than an infidel,' answered her ladyship; 'so pray be silent.'

As the ladies rose from the table, his hostess stooped down and whispered in his ear, 'Go to the smoking-room, George, at once; and whatever you may hear going on in the house, take no notice of it, but remain where you are. I will come to you when all is over.'

Gresham obeyed in silent amazement. What was likely to be going on in the house, and what *could* she mean by 'all being over'?

CHAPTER XV.

A DOUBLE DEPARTURE.

LIKE some deserted Paterfamilias who awaits below stairs the tidings of an addition to his family from the lips of the doctor, Gresham remained in an attitude of attention and anxiety for some hours, with the cigar in his mouth now alight and now extinguished. Strange sounds reached his ears from the distant hall, of muffled voices, of shuffling feet, and of the dragging of heavy weights, and at last he distinctly caught the sound of wheels on the gravel sweep. Could that be the doctor's arrival or departure? or was it possible, he wondered, that Mr. Ferdinand Walcot was gone? It was not unlikely, though it seemed too good to be

true, that after some battle royal between Sir Robert and his wife, the latter, though he had already evidence that she had suffered in the fray, might have conquered, and driven the enemy from her roof. So firmly did this idea gain possession of his mind, that presently, when Lady Arden herself entered the room, with a white and anguished face, he started up and exclaimed, mechanically, 'Has he left the Hall?'

'Yes,' answered she, sadly, and burst into tears.

It was so unusual for her, despite her invalidish ways, to give way to weakness of this sort, that he felt at once some dire catastrophe had taken place. Her victory, perhaps, had cost her a serious quarrel with her husband.

'Yes, George,' she sobbed, 'he has gone; never, as I believe, to return again. I have been cruelly used, but I do not blame my dear husband. He is no longer master of his own actions.'

'Good Heavens! Lady Arden, is my uncle mad?'

'Yes, George; not, indeed, mad in one sense, but worse than mad to leave those who love and honour him, to place himself in the hands of—I must speak the truth, George—of a designing and unprincipled man.'

'My dear madam, that is only half the truth,' observed Gresham. 'Ferdinand Walcot is a most pernicious villain! But I understood you that, at whatever sacrifice, you had got rid of him—that he had left the Hall?'

'And so he has, George; but he has taken my husband with him.'

'What! Taken Sir Robert with him—away from you and yours, and his own home?'

She nodded, for her heart was too full for speech.

'But on what pretext?'

'His health. He declares that his "beloved brother"—as he dared to call him in my presence—needs change of scene, sea air, repose,

and I know not what. Then said I, "My place is by his side;" whereupon he answered that the physician, whom it appears my husband has been privately consulting by letter, had decided otherwise; that the change was to be complete; that as little as possible to remind him of old associations was imperatively insisted upon. "Then why," cried I, "are *you* to be his companion?"

'Then my poor husband answered for the first time for himself, that he could not be parted from his Ferdinand. What humiliation, what disgrace, George!' and the poor woman dropped into a chair and rocked herself to and fro.

'It is, indeed, my dear Lady Arden, most humiliating, most disgraceful, for my poor uncle; but you at least have no cause to reproach yourself.'

'Yes, I have!' exclaimed she, passionately. 'I have been indolent and careless. I have suffered this man to get the upper hand of him without an effort to prevent it, and

merely for the sake of peace and quietness. I have not done my duty. I scarcely blame this —this wicked wretch—more than myself. I have been wilfully deaf and blind to many things for many years. Yet this punishment is more than I have deserved.'

'It is, indeed,' said Gresham, sympathisingly. 'It is impossible you could have guessed half the villany that has been going on about you. I have a tale to tell you which will unmask it all; and I wish to Heaven I had told it before now. Even as it is, when my uncle comes to know about it—which he shall do from my own lips—it cannot be but that his eyes will be opened.'

Lady Arden shook her head. 'No, George; he must find this man out for himself; then he will come back to us who love him, and in his right mind. Nothing that *you* can say would stir him a hair's-breadth. He does not pretend that I have done anything to vex him; but with you he is vehemently displeased. The one thing I have been able to

do was to keep you and him apart this night. I could not trust you, knowing how outspoken you are, to see him before he went. If you had met with that villain standing by his side to egg him on, I am certain you would have resented it. Even as it is, I fear much evil has been done to you as respects your future.'

'Dear Lady Arden, do not think of me.'

'I cannot help it, for you have been wronged —materially, at least—even worse than I. You are Sir Robert's own flesh and blood, his only relative; and I fear—I do fear, George —that he will now take but little count of that. As for me, I was amply, generously provided for on my marriage; and my dear children, if they should reap no further benefits, can never regard your uncle save with affection and gratitude. It was my hope that one of them—— Dear George, I have a heavy sorrow, I fear, in store for you.'

'If you refer to Evelyn, dear Lady Arden,' said Gresham, earnestly, 'pray dismiss that

sorrow from your mind. She will suffer nothing—nor, to say truth, shall I—from the separation at which you hint. We have loved one another as brother and sister, and shall ever love; but in no other way. It was my duty, perhaps, to have told you so before; though, indeed, I have never represented it as otherwise.'

'Then Sir Robert knew this?' exclaimed Lady Arden.

'He did, and more. I am grateful to him that he took it for granted, without representing me to you, as he might have done, in an unfavourable light.'

'I remember now that he said you had deceived us all; but I had no room in my mind for any deceiver save one.'

'Your daughter herself will answer for me,' said Gresham, drawing himself up, 'that I have in no way deceived her. I have not been so frank to others as I might have been, but I have never misrepresented my sentiments to herself. There is no one I more respect and revere;

and, perhaps, at one time—— But she never loved me, Lady Arden.'

'Well, well; I do not understand it. But if matters are so, it is not now to be regretted. Sir Robert said that all was over between you two, and I imagined that he meant to put his veto on your marriage. I have been blind to everything, it seems, and, like one just recovering sight, all is dim and confused.' She passed her hand over her eyes, and sighed wearily.

'Dear Lady Arden, I feel it is a cruelty to question you in this matter, but so much hangs on it, and time may be of such priceless value. Would you tell me, briefly, how it all happened?'

'Well; a few hours ago, having heard that there had been some disturbance among the domestics, and that it was being brought to Sir Robert's ears instead of mine, I went into the study for the purpose of setting things right, and especially of saving my husband from such a source of worry, for which his state of health made him particularly unfitted. I found Sir

Robert and Mr. Walcot with certain papers on the desk before them, and Parker and the footman in the act of leaving the room. I at once asked what was the matter, and my husband answered, "Nothing, dear;" though his face flushed very much, as if in contradiction to his words.

'"Sir Robert has only been transacting a matter of business," explained Mr. Walcot.

'"But the men?" I said. "I hope nothing is amiss with Parker, for he has been with us so long."

'"No, no, nothing," repeated my husband. Then Mr. Walcot whispered to him, and he continued: "The fact is, my dear—and, as Ferdinand says, there is no reason why you should not know it—I called the men in as witnesses; I have been making my will."

'"Good Heavens!" cried I; "why so, Robert? What should put that into your head?"

'"I have been far from well, dear," he answered, "for some time; I am not so young as I was; there is no knowing what may

happen ; it is always well to be prepared for the worst." At this Mr. Walcot nodded approval, and added, gravely, "In your case, Arden, I hope we may say, 'for the best.' "

'His tone was full of tenderness ; but his face, which was turned towards me, wore an expression which chilled my very blood. It was one of devilish malignity and triumph.

' "I don't think it was illness, Robert," said I, boldly, "that put it into your head to make your will, but this man."

' "Her ladyship fears that her interests have not been sufficiently consulted," observed Walcot, coldly. Then I lost my temper, George, and gave that man the lie. Of course it was wrong and unladylike ; but there are some things no woman can stand—to see him there by my husband's side, dearer to him in every way than myself, and suggesting to him that I was actuated by such a sordid fear, was too much for me. I told him what I thought of his conduct and of himself without reserve ; and turning to my husband, I bade him choose

between Ferdinand Walcot and me—his wife, for that I would not dwell another twenty-four hours under the same roof with such a scoundrel.'

'I should have liked to have heard you,' cried Gresham, enthusiastically.

'Yes, George; but I believe it was the very worst thing I could have said, for it brought to a head the very subject which it seems my husband and this man had been debating—namely, the necessity of Sir Robert going abroad.

'Then the wretch turned to my husband, and again he whispered, and again my husband bowed his head in assent; but this time, I am sure, not without great distress and perplexity.

'"I am sorry, Lady Arden, that your mind has been prejudiced against me," said Mr. Walcot, whom my poor husband had thus in my presence made his spokesman; "but you and I are, at all events, still agreed in one thing, that this question of Sir Robert's health is paramount;" and then he went on to say what I have

told you, about the necessity for change, &c. He also said that many things had happened at the Hall of late to trouble Sir Robert, and which rendered it advisable to sever for the present all associations with its tenants; among them some misconduct of Mr. Mayne's, to which I hardly listened (so furious was I with this man, and so positive that he was speaking falsehood), and also some "deception," as he called it, on your part, which had set your uncle justly against you. And to all this my poor husband nodded approval, though, I noticed, without once raising his eyes to mine. Then, without vouchsafing a word of reply to his mouthpiece, I demanded of Sir Robert himself to be allowed to be his companion on his travels in search of health, as my relation to him entitled me to be. The appeal evidently moved him; but on Mr. Walcot's reminding him that I had just stated that I would not live under the same roof with him (Walcot), my poor husband murmured, "True, true," and then "I cannot part from Ferdinand." And he has *not* parted from him,'

concluded the poor lady, once more bursting into a passion of tears; 'he has taken him with him to murder him, for what I know, and will, at all events, never, never, suffer him to return to me and mine.'

Notwithstanding the distress that Gresham experienced at the spectacle of Lady Arden's grief, her excessive indulgence of it did afford him a very welcome opportunity for reflection. If he had had to reply to her last words upon the instant, he would have found it very difficult to say aught with hope or comfort in it; for, as a matter of fact, he took a view of matters at least as gloomy as her own, and even more so. It was, no doubt, her passion that caused her to say that Walcot, 'for all she knew,' intended to murder Sir Robert, but it really did seem to Gresham that that terrible contingency was by no means excluded from the chapter of possibilities. That the Baronet's will had just been made largely in his brother-in-law's favour he felt certain; and his belief in Walcot's villainy had no limit. Moreover, he

felt that Lady Arden had good grounds for her conviction that her husband's evil genius would never permit him to return to the Hall, which he knew by this time was inhabited by his enemies only. At Halcombe, too, were the proofs of his dishonest and cruel conduct, which at a distance were comparatively powerless to harm him, since he would be sure to intercept all letters, or throw discredit on their contents.

'My dear Lady Arden,' said Gresham, after a long silence, 'Time tries all, and in the end my uncle cannot fail to have his eyes opened to this man's character. The generosity of his disposition will then at once cause him to own himself to have been in the wrong, and he will return to us a wiser man—a better and a kinder he cannot be.'

'You have a noble heart, George,' said Lady Arden, pressing his hand. 'It is not only for my sake, I know, that you refrain from reproaching my dear husband. His present severity does not cause you to forget old kindnesses.'

'Why should it?' returned Gresham, simply.

'The kindnesses were his own; the severity and injustice have been grafted for the moment on him by another. You are right in saying that he is not himself. He is the mere tool and mouthpiece of Ferdinand Walcot.'

'But how could he ever have become so? That is the mystery to me. I know that Mr. Walcot has a soft tongue and a strong will; but that he should have power over my husband to cause him to do ill is incomprehensible to me. If Sir Robert were not what we all know him to be, one would think this man had some hold on him—some compromising secret, the fear of the divulgence of which made my poor husband his slave.'

'That, however, as you say, is out of the question,' answered Gresham, musingly. 'No; my impression is that my uncle is the victim of some superstitious belief, and that Walcot works upon his credulity—or rather, I should say, that is Mayne's impression, and his opinion is worth more than mine. He has seen something of these spirit-rappers, and of the influence they acquire over credulous

natures; and Sir Robert *is* credulous, you know, when his confidence has once been won.'

Lady Arden sighed, not so much from the consciousness of having failed to win her husband's confidence as from the reflection that she had not striven to win it.

'Good night, dear George,' she said, presently. 'I am very worn and weary. To-morrow, perhaps, the future may look brighter; to-night all is dark to me.'

'Good night, dear Lady Arden.'

Their parting was very affectionate; they had always liked one another, and their common love and pity for Sir Robert in his misfortune (as they both considered it) drew them still nearer together. Weary as Lady Arden was, she did not, however, omit to pay her usual nightly visit to the Great Baba, who held *levées* in his chamber at all hours, like the kings of France. Such visitations never disturbed him; he would open his large blue eyes mechanically at the kisses of his mother and sisters, and, with a murmured 'Dood night,'

close them again in slumber. But upon this occasion he woke up; a tear had fallen from his mother's eye, as she stooped down to caress him, upon his tender cheek.

'What mumma ty for?' he inquired, wonderingly.

'Because dear papa has gone, darling,' she answered, unable to restrain her grief.

'Why didn't Uncky Ferdinand go instead?' was the unexpected reply.

'He is gone with him, my darling.'

'Oh! Then papa has not gone to Heaven?' observed the little atom, sedately.

'No, no; not yet, darling, thank goodness,' answered his mother, with a want of logic in singular contrast to the stern rationalism of her child. 'Papa has gone away in the carriage, but I fear for ever so long a time.'

'Oh! Then he'll tum home again,' was the comforting rejoinder. 'I thought he had gone in the feather coach.'

Which was the Great Baba's euphonious term for a hearse and plumes.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WORD FROM MARSEILLES.

It was fortunate that Gresham had not been hasty in stating to Lady Arden the wrong that had been done to his friend by Mr. Walcot's machinations, for he had no doubt that it was at his instigation that false witness had been borne against him; had he done so, it was not in woman's nature, or, at all events, in that of her ladyship, not to have 'had it out' with Miss Annabel Spence, which would have led to complications. For on the morning after the departure of the master of the Hall, arrived Mr. Hayling, the family lawyer, with 'instructions' which he had been directed to communicate forthwith to those concerned. From their nature it was evident that Sir Robert contem-

plated a protracted absence, since each head of a department without doors received rules for his guidance for some time to come; while, as to mere domestic matters, there was this singular enactment that no change should be made in the present household without Sir Robert's written consent.

In this, Lady Arden fortunately only saw a new impertinence and arrogance on the part of Walcot, and not, as he doubtless intended it to be, a positive insult. It was pretty certain he had taken it for granted that Mayne had laid the whole circumstances of his case before her, when no alternative would have been left to her but to dismiss Annabel Spence, or to lose her own self-respect. He had secured Sir Robert's consent to retain the girl by pointing out that she was not to blame, or, at all events, only very slightly so in comparison with her would-be seducer, while to turn her out of doors on such a charge would be her ruin. Thus he hoped at once to bring husband and wife into collision, and at the same time—since he was

sure to get his way—to retain at the Hall one person at least devoted to his interests. He knew that the whole hive would be roused against him, and indeed that, for all his craft and power, they would have destroyed him, had he not hit upon the audacious plan of carrying off with him their Queen Bee, Sir Robert.

On Lady Arden's communicating Mr. Hayling's message to Gresham, that young gentleman perceived at once—for hate sharpens our wits as much as love—this device of the common enemy, and resolved to frame what he had to say to his hostess in such a way as for the present to shield Miss Spence from the punishment she so richly deserved, which was the very course, indeed, that his friend himself had enjoined on him. Frederic Mayne was far too chivalrous to wish to be revenged upon a poor servant girl for an offence in which she had been only the instrument; and also, I am afraid, he felt that such a course of action would have tended to diminish the long score

he had set down to the credit of Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, and which it was his fixed and firm intention to settle in full.

'My dear fellow,' he wrote to his friend upon the day after he reached London; 'it has been often cast up against me that I have no object in life; but that is no longer the case. My *raison d'être* for the future is to be even with "Uncle Ferdy." I am not so clever by half; but I have health and strength, and several thousands a year, all which shall be expended in this pursuit rather than not gain my ends. The date of our return match cannot, it is true, at present be fixed; but it will come off, believe me. Of course I am very anxious to hear from you, if only from selfish motives. I trust most sincerely that you have been able to clear my character with Lady Arden without implicating that impressionable young person with the too sensational memory—what she did remember, poor girl, was always, bear in mind, what Walcot taught her. As to what has happened in respect to that gentleman and Sir Robert, I

probably know more than you do. They started yesterday from Folkestone for the South of France; your uncle, I was told by my informant—who has five pounds a week and his expenses for keeping his eye on the runaway couple—looking, you will be sorry to hear, exceedingly ill; *my* "Uncle Ferdy" appearing, on the other hand, to be in excellent health and spirits; a perfect green bay-tree: how long he will "flourish" remains to be seen; this woodman is very eager, and his axe will not fail for want of sharpening (if I don't say "d—— him" it is because it is superfluous, and also because I'm always thinking it). I hope matters have been so explained that you may be able to give my most respectful regards to Lady Arden and the young ladies; remember me to poor Frank in any case—who might put Master Groad into the mill-stream now with a great sense of satisfaction, and without fear of the consequences; and offer my homage to the Great Baba—whose views, I know, coincide with my own respecting our common uncle.

I am looking about for a dreadful toy man for the dear child to shoot at, which shall be much more like F. W. than Quilp's famous figure-head was to Kit. "Oh, that I had him here!" &c. Do not forget also to remember me cordially to Dyneley. He is a most capital good fellow, but he entertains fanatical views about the forgiveness of injuries. The most he could exact from me with respect to "Uncle Ferdy" is that I would forgive him—if he escaped my righteous indignation. Before all things we must pay our debts. I picture you all breathing freely in the absence of the oppressor, and yet so genuinely sorry about Sir Robert. Of course it was "the spirits" who did it; their power—or rather the weakness of poor humanity in connection with them—is wonderful. Our difficulties will, I fear, be only half over, even if Walcot shows himself (as he is sure to do sooner or later) to his brother-in-law in his true colours; for nothing is so hard in the way of owning oneself wrong—even to generous and forgiving natures such as are to be found

at Halcombe—as to admit that we have been deceived and cajoled. In case Holm has to leave the farm for "rounding," as Groad called it, on his tyrant, I shall be able, perhaps, to do something for him. You will write particularly to me respecting Miss Evelyn and Miss Millicent, who, I hope, have heard nothing to my discredit. The mere thought of this is intolerable to me. I fly from it—and all the more eagerly from having experienced its contact—to the contemplation of my new object in life. Surely by giving one's whole time and attention to it, it ought to be attained. You will say I have "Uncle Ferdy" on the brain. I am afraid it is so, and so it will be till I have him on the hip.—Yours ever faithfully,

'FREDERIC MAYNE.

'A telegram just informs me that our respective uncles have reached Marseilles, where they show signs of remaining for the present.'

The postscript was the first intimation that the family at Halcombe had received of the

movements of Sir Robert, whose silence sufficiently indicated his high displeasure. In the meantime there had been several councils held at the Hall, and one or two (where the calumet, or pipe of amity, was not wanting) between Gresham and Dyneley at the Manor Farm. Unhappily a 'masterly inactivity' was the only course of action for the present open to them—with one exception. When Lady Arden had been placed in possession of the facts respecting the persecution of her son, she dismissed Mr. Groad from her service upon the spot. He did not come under the head of domestic servants, and was therefore unprotected by Sir Robert's edict; but it is doubtful whether, even if he had been, her ladyship would have endured his presence at Halcombe. Thanks to Gresham's knowledge of his transactions in peaches (which he shrewdly suspected was not the first), Mr. Groad made no strenuous resistance, but started off with his hopeful son, three months' wages in advance, and the black parrot, within twenty-four hours.

Gilbert Holm, returning on that afternoon from Mirton, met the covered cart which contained this 'happy family' coming over the moor, and proffered a good-natured 'Good-bye;' but the only reply he got—which was, however, some explanation for their silence—was from that truthful bird, who croaked as usual, 'We are all for ourselves here,' and was incontinently shaken, cage and all, by Jem, for holding communication with the enemy.

If Lady Arden's wrath against one of Mr. Walcot's mere instruments burnt thus fiercely, it may be imagined with what feelings she regarded that gentleman himself. With all his knowledge of human nature he probably underrated the resentment he had aroused in her, the love of a mother for her child being a factor that men of his class are incapable of estimating, though they can appreciate numbers (in financial matters) up to millions. Of course she was for the present powerless; but from that moment there were possibilities of reprisal in

her, which, if his eyes could have read them, would have paled his dishonest cheek.

Mr. George Gresham (who would have wrung his neck, however, with much satisfaction) was far less inimical to him; indeed he was almost grateful to Mr. Walcot in one particular, namely, for that ukase for leaving the household undisturbed, which secured to him the society of his Elise.

'No matter what happens to me, my darling, in the future,' he whispered to her, consolingly, 'I am yours for ever, and I could almost forgive the scoundrel for not having separated us in the meantime.'

At which that prudent and astute young Teutoness shook her little head. 'Oh, George,' she said, 'has love so blinded you that you do not see the man's intention in allowing me to remain here? He wishes your passion to precipitate matters; nothing would please him better than that you should marry me out of hand, so that all he has said to your uncle should be corroborated, and there should be a

just pretext not only for your disinheritance hereafter, but for withdrawing his countenance from you on the spot.'

'Then let us gratify him,' cried Gresham, cheerfully; 'we are told, you know, to give pleasure to those that hurt us.'

'Yes; but not to ruin those that love us,' was her prompt reply. 'I always told you that you were endangering your best interests by bestowing your affections on such as I am. I shall never reproach you for withdrawing them, or placing them more fitly' (here her voice slightly trembled) 'elsewhere. In any case, my resolve is thus far fixed—that you shall run no further risks on my account. If our union cannot take place without such a loss of your uncle's favour as we have good cause to fear, indeed, indeed, George, I will never become your wife.'

'Very good,' said Gresham; 'we are still young' (here he kissed her to prove it), 'and can afford to wait a bit. In the meantime let us be happy with one another.'

Considering the relative position they were understood to occupy in the family, this would not have been accomplished under ordinary circumstances without some difficulty; since, for the young man of the house to take solitary walks with the governess, and to converse with her in her native tongue for the purpose of isolation, is generally considered, at the best, 'peculiar.' But Lady Arden, always prone to take small notice of anything beyond her children and her 'symptoms,' was now consumed by the thought of her own wrongs and Frankie's, and disposed to concentrate all her sense of misdoing upon a single offender.

The two girls, it is true, were sharp as needles, and had eyes to which all the attempted concealments of a *tendresse* would have been transparent; but then George was a great favourite with them, and had been always wont to have his own way, and they both liked Elise, who, so far from being a designing character, they took note discouraged her swain's attentions rather than otherwise. At

the same time they were by no means without the social prejudices of their class, and might possibly have resented such 'goings on' but for certain circumstances in their own position, which at present it would be immature, if not indelicate, to refer to more particularly, than as a fellow-feeling which had made them wondrous kind.

A student of female nature can always assure himself whether a woman has ever been in love or not, by watching her conduct towards any one of her own sex who is professedly in that predicament. There is a tenderness and sympathy in her manner (and especially if there are obstacles to the engagement) which scarcely any other circumstances elicit in so marked a way, and she will always put her shoulder to the wheel (of Hymen) with a will.

In old maids there are to my mind few more touching spectacles than this behaviour; it speaks of a dead love—or worse, perhaps a lost one—upon whose grave, along with the

forget-me-nots, grow gentleness and pity, and in which envy has no root.

It may be added that, in any case, Mr. George Gresham was not one to brook interference with his affections from unauthorised quarters; and if remonstrated with, even by Lady Arden herself, he would have replied, and not without some reason, that, however strong the arguments which might at one time have been urged against his love for Elise Hurt, they had now lost their force; for it was almost certain he was no longer his uncle's heir, if, indeed, he inherited anything; and that the incompatibility, therefore, arising from the difference of social position no longer existed.

Even if it did exist, it did not, at all events, affect his spirits; and when the spring time came on and touched fair Halcombe with its fairy wand, it found George Gresham already 'May from head to heel.'

As to the other inhabitants of the Hall, if they were not so merry, yet the absence of Sir Robert, which they mourned with genuine sor-

row, not unmingled in Lady Arden's case with a sharp and bitter pain, was greatly mitigated by the sense of freedom, of emancipation from the rule of Ferdinand Walcot. That of the Great Baba—who was now more paramount than ever—being tempered by love, was, we may be sure, infinitely preferable to it.

They were not without news of the nominal master of the house. Sir Robert wrote letters to his wife from time to time, which were duly read—for there was nothing, alas! of a confidential kind in them—to the family circle. His health he described as still failing; but always added that everything was done for him that could be done, and that he was tended by kind and loving hands.

These expressions—which were evidently not his own—were odious to her to whom they were addressed; and in her replies she studiously avoided any allusion to them.

Gresham, on the contrary, would have induced her to take some comfort from them.

'It is certain,' he argued, 'that my uncle

does not write them to annoy you. Why, then, should he write them at all, save to keep up a resolution that has begun to waver, to assure himself of a fact to which a glimmer of doubt already attaches itself? If Walcot looks over his shoulder—which is quite as likely as not, by the bye—the idea that such remarks will suggest is "Methinks he doth protest too much."'

This was also Mr. Dyneley's view.

All theories about the actual state of Sir Robert's mind were suddenly, however, put to flight by a letter from him, which arrived about the beginning of June: a part of the contents of which were singularly grave and ominous:—

'As neither my health nor spirits show any signs of improvement, I am about, under medical advice, to try the effects of a long sea voyage. As the first of a new line of vessels starts on the 6th from this port to Australia, without calling elsewhere on the way, we have taken the opportunity of securing berths in her. I have the great advantage of Ferdinand's experi-

ence of this new country, and hope to write you from it a much better and brighter account of myself. Kiss the dear girls and boys fondly for me.'

There was not a word of remembrance to Gresham.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOUSE WITHOUT ITS HEAD.

PRESCIENT as the family at Halcombe were of misfortunes sooner or later to happen in connection with their head, this last tidings exceeded all that had been looked for in the way of evil. It seemed to them that if once Ferdinand Walcot should contrive to place half the world between Sir Robert and his belongings, he would be lost to them for ever. The fact of Walcot's 'knowing the country' by no means gave them the satisfaction that it seemed to afford their correspondent. It would only give this man another advantage over his confiding companion, who, far from home and friends, and perhaps surrounded by creatures of

his brother-in-law, would fall more completely into his power than ever.

The cruelty of Sir Robert's withdrawal from them to so immense a distance, without one syllable of regret, was felt by Lady Arden very keenly; but, to do her justice, this feeling was swallowed up by her apprehensions upon his account.

'Dear George,' said she, with earnest gravity, 'my mind misgives me about this matter more than I dare to express.'

'It is a most ill-judged proceeding of my uncle's, without doubt,' answered Gresham, as carelessly as he could; 'but since he chooses this man's society, it is quite as well he should have it on shipboard. Mayne tells me it is enough to make a man hate his mother, to be shut up with her for a three months' voyage; and Sir Robert will see this fellow in his true colours long before he reaches Melbourne.'

'I am so glad to remember,' said Milly, gravely, 'that Mr. Walcot is a bad sailor.'

'He is a bad everything, my dear,' observed

Lady Arden, regardless of logic. 'He will end by murdering your poor dear papa in the Bush.'

'My *dear* Lady Arden!' exclaimed Gresham, reprovingly; but in his heart of hearts he thought this prophecy far from unlikely to come to pass. His views of Ferdinand Walcot, always far from favourable, had of late, perhaps, gathered corroboration from his friend Mayne's epistles, which were always full of 'Uncle Ferdy;' and for whom they had no epithet less strong than 'villain.'

'I have got my eye on him,' ran his last letter, 'and am watching him narrowly, though at second hand, like vermin under the microscope.'

But not a word had he said about this Australian project.

Under these circumstances, it was urged by Lady Arden that Mr. Mayne should be at once communicated with, and invited down to the Hall.

'He has been so friendly to us, George,' she said, 'and has taken such immense pains in this

matter, that we cannot do enough to show our gratitude; and then it would be such a comfort to have his counsel at such a crisis.'

'But Mayne always says, Lady Arden, that he is under a great obligation to us for having given him a pursuit. And you see it is the London season, and it is rather hard to bring a fellow down to Halcombe—though I am sure he would be delighted—and——' And further than that 'and,' Mr. George Gresham could not get.

The fact was, he knew his friend would be willing enough to come, but that he would be restrained from doing so from feelings of delicacy towards Sir Robert. 'I have no right,' he had written, 'ever to enter your uncle's house until the imputation that has been made upon my behaviour while under his roof has been removed. At present he thinks me a blackguard, and no wonder. His last words were to forbid me to speak with any ladies of his family. Of course this is all owing to "Uncle Ferdy"'—here followed the usual

digression concerning his intentions of 'making it all right' with that gentleman, and 'something over;' allusions to the 'return match' to come off at some indefinite date, &c., &c.—'but that does not alter the fact that it would be an impertinence in me to show my nose at Halcombe.'

Now Gresham had slurred over to Lady Arden (as well he might) the cause of offence supposed to have been given by Mayne, but he was not good at framing excuses.

'I think you do your friend wrong,' said she, 'in supposing that he would not give up the pleasures of society for a day or two to come and help us in our trouble.'

'I think so, too,' said Evelyn, gently.

Millicent said nothing, but blushed so very much that Gresham imagined that some story to his friend's discredit must have reached her ears.

'I think, under the circumstances,' said he, 'a line from yourself, Lady Arden, would have more force than anything I can write.'

'Then he shall have it, George,' was her reply.

Gresham felt the need of his friend's presence at such a crisis at least as much as the rest. The two young men had many points in common (it is curious, indeed, *how* alike young men of their type are), but Mayne's was the leading spirit. They were equally honourable, generous, and resolute; but Gresham was indolent where his friend was vigorous, and the latter had the keener wits. When to these circumstances of superiority we add the fact of Mayne's large fortune, and the power it conferred upon him, it is easy to understand how the other leant upon him. Dyneley, indeed, would have seemed to be the natural ally to whom the inmates of the Hall should have turned in this emergency; but respect for his patron (as they thought), or the knowledge that, however involuntarily, he had struck the first note of this domestic discord, had of late kept the Curate silent even on occasions when his advice was looked for.

As a matter of fact he was only too eager to help them by his counsel, but shrank from volunteering that good office, which must necessarily draw him nearer and nearer to Evelyn, his relation to whom he felt to be that of the moth to the candle. She attracted him, and very innocently, but (so it seemed to him) to his own destruction. Not that he was so modest that he felt it impossible she could ever reciprocate his affection, but that circumstances appeared now more than ever to forbid him to hope to win her.

It was improbable that at any time her step-father would have listened to his suit; but now, when Sir Robert was already far from pleased with the family, his pretensions would be sure to be treated with contempt, and moreover would undoubtedly be used by Walcot to Evelyn's own disadvantage; and the Curate was not the man to injure another—far less the girl he loved—for the gratification of self.

On the other hand, there were limits even to

his self-sacrifice. He could not seek Evelyn's society, be intimate and even confidential with her; speak with her, take her hand, as a friend and almost a brother—with such far from brotherly feelings; it was more than he could bear, to be permitted to talk to her upon every topic—even tender ones—for she spoke to him of Gresham and Elise—save the very one which was always on the tip of his tongue, but on which honour bade him be silent.

Therefore the Curate was not so constant a visitor at the Hall as he once had been, when the field was less open to him; and Lady Arden perhaps a little resented this, which rendered his keeping away the easier.

Her letter to Mr. Mayne was answered in less time than by return of post by the arrival of that gentleman himself, the cordiality of whose reception by Lady Arden and her elder daughter at once set him at his ease, and placed him in his old position in the family. Gresham had, indeed, assured him that this would be the case, and that nothing 'unpleasant'

had transpired respecting him; but he was greatly pleased to be thus personally convinced of the fact. As to his transgression of Sir Robert's veto, he either felt that the circumstances were grave enough to excuse it, or Lady Arden's note, and his own wish to revisit Halcombe, had overcome them. Gresham, of course, had received him even more warmly than did the others, but there was still one whose welcome this exacting young gentleman missed. He so far forgot himself as to look round the room with an inquiring air—which Gresham was good enough with a twinkle in his eye to translate for him.

'You wonder why Dyneley is not here' (Mayne had mentioned having caught sight of him in the village); 'if you want him, you must go to his lodgings. He doesn't visit at this house now, and is supposed to be a creature of Uncle Ferdy's.'

'For shame!' cried Lady Arden. 'How can you jest upon such a subject, George?'

'George will jest on anything,' observed

Evy, with unwonted severity and heightened colour.

'That is quite my experience of him,' said Mayne, demurely. 'He has no ballast.'

Here Milly entered the room; she had been standing outside the door for fully a minute, not listening at the keyhole, nor saying 'plums, prunes, and prism' with a view to getting a proper shape to her mouth; yet something like the latter she had been doing. If she had been a man we should say she had been 'pulling herself together' in order to enter the room with an easy and indifferent air. In this she was not very successful; for when one is indifferent (to the presence of a visitor for example) one does not blush and tremble, and murmur 'How do you do?' as though with the last failing breath of poor humanity.

Mr. Mayne, however, it was plain to see, was less critical than cordial. His happiness was so bright and clear that it reflected itself even in the grief-worn face of Lady Arden. Her mother's heart doubtless predicted for her

a spot of sunshine in that future which until now had seemed all dark; but the next moment the present trouble, like a parted curtain, once more dropt its folds about her.

'You have come, Mr. Mayne,' said she, 'from a bright world to a very sombre one; nothing but the shadow of death itself could have affected us with a deeper sadness than the news of my poor husband. Do you think it *can* be true?'

'I am afraid, Lady Arden, I must needs corroborate it, from tidings I have received from another quarter.'

'Great Heavens! To think of my poor husband, weak and ill, and in that distant land, with no one but a false wretch like Ferdinand Walcot to depend upon!'

At the sight of which picture, so often presented to her imagination, the poor lady melted into tears.

'My dear Lady Arden,' said Mayne, gently; 'do not let us take too sombre views of what is

no doubt a bad business. Your husband, I have good reason to believe, is not so ill as he imagines himself to be, and the voyage may be of real service to him. Moreover, I have taken such measures as will prevent him being left to Mr. Walcot's tender mercies. An unknown but trusty friend will accompany him.'

'What! On board the ship?'

'Yes. A friend of mine is also desirous of trying the effect of a long sea voyage.'

'Oh, Mr. Mayne, you are too good! You have sent some one expressly to look after my dear husband! Hitherto I have not interfered with your kind offices—that is, with the material part of them—it seemed, somehow, that I ought not to be spending Sir Robert's money in keeping watch, as it were, over his own actions; but now that the peril is grown so serious and so urgent, you must really allow me to defray——'

'Pardon me, my dear madam,' interrupted Mayne, gently, 'but you entirely misunderstand what has been done, and, I am sorry to say,

credit me with much more than I deserve. My little arrangements have nothing to do with Sir Robert—that is, directly. They have been made, as Gresham will tell you, with quite another object. It is a personal matter between myself and Mr. Ferdinand Walcot, and concerns no one else—that is, directly. It has been some expense to me, no doubt, but then it is my only hobby.'

And Mr. Mayne smiled, and rubbed his hands together slowly, like a man who 'sees his way.'

'I understand your delicate way of putting it,' answered Lady Arden, smiling also, in spite of herself; 'but, after all, it is my husband's safety with which you are so good as to concern yourself, and I really must be allowed——'

'You can send another man after Sir Robert, of course,' put in Mayne, quietly; 'but as to interfering with my confidential agent, there is really no excuse for it. He has quite another matter in hand, though it happens to have a connection with that in which you are so vitally

interested. Such being the case, I have brought down with me a collection of "Reports" I have received from time to time from the person who manages my little affair, and which may repay perusal.'

'Reports from Marseilles, do you mean?' exclaimed Lady Arden.

'From Marseilles and other places,' answered Mayne, coolly. 'They form quite a little biography of—of the gentleman I am concerned about—from the time he quitted England. The manuscript has all the advantage of a legal document, being written without stops and in a gigantic hand, combined with the interest of a fiction.'

Later in the day the manuscript was produced; it appeared to consist of several reams, and if nothing else, as Mayne said, should come of it, the employer of such a correspondent could never complain that he had not had enough for his money. The items of importance, however, were but few. The two gentlemen had accomplished their journey to Mar-

seilles with great rapidity—indeed with surprising haste, since one of them was an invalid—and had afterwards lived at their hotel, quietly, but by no means in seclusion. They had occasionally dined at the *table d'hôte*, and had made acquaintances in the town; one a fellow-countryman of the name of Marshall, who had been seized with severe illness on his way to Cannes; he had been formerly known to Sir Robert, but Mr. Walcot was particularly kind and attentive to him; another, a Mr. Grosvenor, who often drove out with them; another, a Mrs. Wilmot, who held spiritual *séances* at her house near the Quai, &c.

Although, in short, Mr. Walcot rarely left his brother-in-law, he made no attempt to isolate him in any way. Sir Robert looked weak and worn, and was manifestly in bad spirits, but by no means gave the impression of being seriously ill. His appetite was small; Mr. Mayne's informant condescended to explain that he had had a personal opportunity of observing this at the *table d'hôte*; but the rest of his budget had to

be taken on trust for the present; it was dangerous to commit details to writing.

Such were the heads of what the secret agent had to tell. In a subsequent despatch he stated that Walcot had taken passage for himself and Sir Robert for Australia in the steamer 'Apollo' without the least attempt at concealment; 'though if that had not been the case,' added the writer, with a pretty touch of egotism, 'you would equally have been informed of it.'

Here was matter enough for conjecture and apprehension in the little household, but unhappily nothing on which action could be taken. Only the long and serious talks that ensued had the effect of making Mr. Mayne's relations with the ladies more and more familiar, and himself more recognised as a friend of the family. Gresham, as we have confessed, though sincerely regretting the misfortunes of the house, was by no means inconsolable under them, or at all events without the means of consolation. Evelyn, though grave, could not certainly be

said to be overcome with grief. The society of Mr. Walcot since his declaration of love for her had become so painful, nay abhorrent, that his absence was a welcome relief, notwithstanding that it entailed that of her step-father also. If one could have looked into her heart, it was not *that* trouble, which vexed it most; though it was more defined and positive than any other.

Millicent was happy in spite of herself; in vain she reproved her own heart for its gladness and brightness at a time so inopportune, and under circumstances that evidently weighed down her dearest and nearest with a heavy sorrow.

Frank, though he had loved his step-father much, had feared 'Uncle Ferdy' more, and openly rejoiced in his enfranchisement.

The Great Baba made no secret of his satisfaction at the departure of his enemy.

'But you want dear papa to come back, don't you, darling?' had been a question addressed to him by his fond mother.

'Ess: but not to bring back at wicked

man with him aden : he must put him into the pit-hole first, and then tum.' The pit-hole being the grave.

All the young folks at Halcombe, in fact, though they loved Sir Robert dearly, bore his absence with a certain degree of equanimity, the knowledge of which disquieted them. To their tender consciences it seemed ungrateful to be thus at ease while their benefactor was in such dangerous hands, though it was his own choice that had placed him there.

Lady Arden alone was genuinely wretched ; she now perceived that something more and deeper than her *amour propre* had been wounded by Sir Robert's preference of Walcot's companionship to her own ; that she really loved this husband who had thus withdrawn himself from her, as her heart misgave her, for ever, and to whom, while he was with her, she had failed or fallen short in loving duty. When the 6th of the month came round, the date on which he was to sail for the under world, her sorrow reached its climax ; she withdrew

herself to her own room, and remained there for the whole day, save for one hour, when she walked out alone to the hill-top, and gazed with tears upon that ocean on which he had already begun his voyage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PERPLEXITIES.

That one cannot have one's cake without certain drawbacks is well understood; and in the country, when one has been asked to dinner, it is necessary to make a call to acknowledge the obligation. Thus it happened at this date that Mr. and Mrs. Raynes came over to Halcombe in due course, and found things in very different case than on their last visit. They had of course heard tidings of Sir Robert's departure; but they had no idea under what circumstances it had occurred, nor was it very easy to inform them without betraying family secrets. Moreover, despite his good nature, there was a certain inopportuneness in the presence of Mr. Raynes on the spot where

any calamity had occurred, by reason of his grinning. It was not that he made a jest of sorrow; but on hearing what surprised him, whether grave or gay, he always met it with his mouth split. No sound necessarily escaped him—this was controlled by circumstances—though when he did laugh he laughed like a horse; but had one said to him, 'My father is dead,' he would have received it with the same look of amazed drollery as the intelligence of the demise of Queen Anne. As if to make up, too, for his silence or inaptness of speech, he had generally a quotation from Shakespeare handy which under really serious circumstances made him appear only more ridiculous, and even affected, albeit he was one of the most genuine as well as gentle souls alive.

Lady Arden herself was not visible to this worthy couple on this occasion; they were received by the younger members of the family, who explained as best as they could the misfortune that had befallen them. Mrs. Raynes, good soul, at once dissolved into tears

and silence; but her more robust spouse, eager to comfort and most unwontedly loquacious, could not but think Travel was the best thing for Sir Robert. 'When he comes back,' said he, 'we shall see changes in him, no doubt, after so long a voyage; if he does not lisp and wear strange suits, we shall scarce think he has swum in a gondola.'

At this the young ladies smiled, with alien lips, as they well might, not in the least understanding him, whilst the poor gentleman went on to express his satisfaction that their step-father had at least a friend with him 'of adoption tried, and grappled to his soul with hooks of steel.' His misconception of the whole situation was in short so complete, and under the circumstances so intolerable, that both Evy and Milly withdrew their attention from him, and left him to be entertained by his young friend Frank. Not a wit discouraged by this, the good man pursued his well-meant vein of consolation. 'Well, my boy, you have lost *your* dear step-father—unexpectedly

—for an indefinite period. The very same thing once occurred to me; *my* step-father was snatched away from me, and even more suddenly, not by water, but by another element—the wind. He was carried away in a balloon.'

Frank, who had hitherto been but moderately interested, here pricked up his ears.

'In a balloon, Mr. Raynes! How came he in a balloon?'

'Well—he was—yes, a scientific individual devoted to balloon ascents. Not that he understood the management of such things, poor man, or he might have been here to-day. He went up on an occasion—for an experiment—with a donkey tied to the car.'

'A donkey?' Frankie clapped his hands delightedly. He would almost have been reconciled to his present bereavement if he could have seen Sir Robert depart in so admirable a manner.

'It's no joke, my young friend,' said Mr.

Raynes, reprovingly: 'I saw the poor man come down, and thought as lightly of it as yourself, for the spectacle was no novelty to me, only some idiot in the crowd cut the donkey loose before my unfortunate relative was aware of what he was at, and, being thus freed from the quadruped's weight, the balloon shot up like a sky-rocket with my step-father in it.'

'But he came down, I suppose?' exclaimed Frank.

'Not to my knowledge,' returned Mr. Raynes, coolly. 'No one ever saw him come down. He is probably careering about "the viewless fields of air," (Shakespeare, my boy) at this very moment. He left his earthly friends ten years ago. Now your case is not so bad as that, Frank, so cheer up.'

Frank not only cheered up, but began to give way to such exuberant mirth that it scandalised his sisters, who promptly reproved him for want of feeling.

'I couldn't help it,' gasped Frank.

'I am sorry that my recital of the loss of a relative should have awakened his mirth,' said Mr. Raynes, in his gravest manner. And then he grinned, beyond anything, one would think, that mortal mouth had ever attempted, and took his departure.

'He is really too eccentric,' said Evelyn.

'His "Judy," as he will call his Julie, is almost as bad,' returned Millicent. 'She told me—oh Heavens, here he is again!'

'One moment, ladies,' observed Mr. Raynes, putting his head in at the door; 'we were just off, when I remembered something—which may be of importance. We drove to Mirton this morning, and the postmaster, hearing we were coming to Halcombe, asked me to bring over this telegram; it is for Mr. Mayne. He is here, is he not?'

'Yes, yes; oh, thank you!'

He grinned so that, as he disappeared, he seemed to have swallowed himself (like the cat in 'Alice in Wonderland').

'Let us take it at once over to the Manor

Farm,' cried Milly; 'the three gentlemen are all together there, I know.'

'I think we had better send it across,' answered Evy. She did not wish to call at Mr. Dyneley's, nor perhaps that her sister should appear to seek out Mr. Mayne. In ten minutes the latter returned in Gresham's company, and with the open telegram.

'Here is strange news,' said he; 'one hardly knows whether to think it good or not. It comes from my agent, Bevill. "Sir R. and W. have not gone to Australia, they have sailed for England. Important. I come home by to-night's mail."'

'Then papa is coming back after all!' exclaimed Milly, joyfully; 'he can be here to-morrow, can he not?'

'He is not coming alone, unhappily,' observed Gresham. Evelyn, too, looked very grave. Milly, in short, was the only one to whom this news brought unalloyed satisfaction, and that, as it happened, only for a moment. The next speaker utterly dispelled it.

'If Sir Robert is coming back, Mayne, I am afraid we shall lose you?' observed Gresham, forgetting the reason why he could not remain at Halcombe in the fact.

Mayne nodded and answered, coldly, 'Yes; it would not be pleasant to remain under your uncle's roof, after our little misunderstanding.'

Milly longed to say, 'What *can* it matter, whatever it is? Do stop;' but of course she remained silent.

'I am sure that dear papa will not take us by surprise,' said Evelyn, confidently. 'He is too considerate for that.'

'True we need do nothing in a hurry,' said Gresham; 'we shall probably hear of my uncle's movements by to-morrow's post.'

'I do not think so,' said Evelyn. 'He would surely have written from Marseilles on this sudden change of purpose had he wished to inform us of his movements.'

To this no one had anything to say; the remark seemed somehow inconsistent with that she had just uttered respecting the consider-

ation of Sir Robert for others. And yet they knew it was not so.

'Of course it's all Walcot's doing,' said Gresham, expressing the general sentiment. 'I wonder what he does it *for*.'

'For some wise and good purpose, no doubt,' said Mayne, unctuously; 'dear Uncle Ferdy!'

'Oh, Mr. Mayne; how *can* you!' remonstrated Milly.

'My dear young lady, I have the warmest interest in the gentleman in question, I do assure you. I long to meet him; though, it is true, not here. I am delighted that the ocean will not now separate us. And, next to meeting him, I long to hear about him. What do you say to my telegraphing to Bevill to come to Mirton, where we can hold communication with him without awakening the suspicions of the enemy? He will bring us the latest information concerning Sir Robert, by the light of which, perhaps, we may be enabled to see our way.'

Gresham and the rest thought this an excellent plan; while Lady Arden herself made no opposition to it. She would not have liked the man to come to the Hall—it seemed like encouraging an espionage upon her husband; but there was nothing offensive to her in his being at Mirton, where Mr. Mayne might consult him on his own affairs.

Practically, the difference was but slight, but in matters of feeling it often happens that as little suffices to salve as to wound; moreover, the poor lady's curiosity to know what had taken place to change her husband's plans was excessive; and Mr. Bevill would at least afford them some data to enable them to guess at this.

Mr. Mayne, therefore, telegraphed as proposed. In the meantime the family at the Hall remained in a very unpleasant state of tension, expecting, or rather apprehending, they knew not what, and exceedingly embarrassed by receiving no communication from Sir Robert.

On the first news of his change of intention

Lady Arden had been very hopeful; expressing herself confident that her husband had repented of deserting them (even if he had not emancipated himself from the influence of his brother-in-law), and was returning in all haste to his home. Even though Walcot should accompany him, such a result seemed better to her than his prolonged and indefinite absence; and the getting things 'patched up,' than a complete, and, perhaps, permanent rupture.

But as the days went by, and her husband gave no sign of his return, she began to grow morbidly anxious and alarmed. It was with some difficulty, indeed, when news came of the agent's expected arrival at the inn at Mirton, that she could be restrained from going thither, and hearing his story with her own ears.

In the end, however, Mayne and Gresham drove over thither alone, while Dyneley remained with her to administer such consolation as his presence and arguments could afford. The family distress had broken down his resolution to keep aloof from the Hall; and his

sober and hopeful view of matters acted like a tonic.

'Certainly, when one is in trouble,' admitted her ladyship, who had been no little aggrieved by his late apparent coldness, 'there is no one who comforts me like Dyneley. Don't you think so, Evelyn?'

'I always thought him a very good man, mamma,' was her gentle reply.

But if the Curate took sanguine views of the state of affairs, they were by no means shared by the other two young men; who being either less charitable, or having suffered more seriously at Walcot's hands, were ready to credit him with any enormity.

As they sat in the dog-cart together, driving over the moor in thoughtful silence, Gresham flicked the mare with his whip, and suddenly exclaimed, 'I believe the man means murder. He has got my uncle in some out-of-the-way spot, and is doing him to death, probably by poison. Else he would surely have written to his wife.'

'Men don't always write to their wives, my dear Gresham.'

'But a good man, like my uncle, who must needs know she is in distress and anxiety about him—he would certainly write, if he could.'

'Not necessarily, if he is ashamed of himself,' argued Mayne. 'And besides, his letters may have been intercepted. I quite agree with you, of course, that Uncle Ferdy would stick at nothing on moral grounds. But he is not of the stuff that murderers are made of. He has too delicate a consideration for his own skin. His rule in life is material advantage, to which all his other passions are subservient. One would have thought, for example, he would have wreaked his revenge on Groad and Holm, who betrayed him; but he has taken no steps in that direction, from motives of policy.'

'It would be his policy to murder my uncle,' returned Gresham, 'if his last will—as I have no doubt is the case—has been made in his favour.'

'No doubt; and he would do it without

scruple, but for the consequences. He is a man that weighs consequences very nicely, and never incurs a risk that is avoidable. To raise his hand against your uncle, knowing, as he well does, what we two think of him, would be very dangerous. However, we shall hear what Bevill says about it, who is quite without prejudice. I believe him to be loyal to me as his employer; but he is not troubled with sentiment of any kind, and would have served Uncle Ferdy himself with equal fidelity, if he had happened to retain him. That is why he left the Police and set up on his own account as a social detective. He felt that his area of action was too circumscribed.'

'I should say, then, he is likely to find it some day still more limited—by a prison wall, for example.'

'Not at all; there is no fear of that. Bevill has a respect for the law, which he looks upon as an old employer. He would never hold a brief on the opposite side.'

'Still—though it is ungrateful of me to say so

—I should feel uncomfortable in employing such an instrument.'

'I am glad to hear you say that, because it leaves this matter, where I wished it to be, solely in my own hands. When one fights with the Indians, one does not stand up in scarlet to be shot at in an open space; one has to dodge, like them, behind the trees. I have hired this gentleman to dodge *for* me. You have often noticed, doubtless, what a fine head of hair Uncle Ferdy has got. Well, he is a great chief; but I mean to have his scalp.'

Before the inn door, as they drove up, stood a stout and contemplative person with a straw in his mouth, whom Mayne at once indicated as 'my agent;' else Gresham would have probably taken him for a commercial traveller in the illustrated book or the fancy jewellery line, to neither of which branches of commerce much encouragement was afforded at Mirton. So much of time he seemed to have on his hands, and so little to do in it; and at the same time so totally indifferent did he appear to the

beauties of land and sea, which offered themselves to the gaze from the spot he occupied, in sublime profusion. His hands were plunged deep in his pockets, though, from the contour of his figure, it was plain that they could not be withdrawn from thence without some difficulty. His hat was tilted on the back of his head and displayed a countenance like the moon at full, and without more vestiges of vegetation. It was the face of a fat boy, except for a few lines in it, which time had drawn about the brow and mouth, and expressed—if it expressed anything—a good-natured vacuity.

Even the arrival of his employer awoke but little vitality in Mr. Bevill. He extricated his right hand from his pocket, touched his hat with his forefinger, and cast one momentary but scrutinising glance at Gresham.

Mr. Bevill never lost an opportunity of observation and never wasted his energies; he knew Mayne already.

'Good morning, Mr. Bevill; this is Sir Robert's nephew, Mr. George Gresham.'

'So I concluded, sir, from seeing him in your company: otherwise it would not have struck me.'

'You see no family resemblance?' said Mayne, laughing. 'Perhaps you think he is more like *my* uncle, Uncle Ferdy.'

'Same build, sir, but that's all,' replied the detective, sententiously.

'Not so clever, by half, you mean, Mr. Bevill,' said Gresham, laughing.

'Well, sir, I didn't *say* that. But even if it were so, you might be clever enough as cleverness goes. The gentleman to whom your friend was referring' (it was a characteristic of Mr. Bevill never to mention names; he thought it a bad habit, and, besides, the groom had come forward to take the mare) 'has wits enough for half-a-dozen.'

'You are bound to speak highly of him since he has outwitted Mr. Bevill,' said Mayne, lightly.

'Well, yes, sir, for the present—there is no doubt about it; he *has!*'

'Well, come indoors, and let's talk it over.'

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. BEVILL.

Mr. Bevill, when not on duty, was of a retiring disposition, and had already installed himself in the only private sitting-room of which the little inn could boast. A low-roofed apartment, of small dimensions, and these encroached upon by a collection of old china, tropical shells, stuffed fish of truculent and spiky aspect, and other 'curios' brought home by seafaring men of Mirton, and purchased by the landlord on easy terms. There was room, however, for the two visitors, who were about to seat themselves near the open window, when Mr. Bevill put in an objection.

'Under that window there is a bench, where the village folks sit, I have noticed'

(he had been in Mirton about half-an-hour). 'It may not signify, but still it may. Our gentleman'—it was thus he always spoke of Mr. Walcot, just as Mayne applied to him the derisively familiar term of 'Uncle Ferdy'—'our gentleman may have friends here with sharp ears.'

'Your gentleman has no friends anywhere,' observed Gresham, grimly.

'Pardon me,' said Mr. Bevill, 'every one has friends everywhere—who has money.'

He closed the window, and pointed to a little table in a corner of the room, round which they took their seats.

'You have read my reports to your friend here, Mr. Gresham, I conclude?' (The word 'reports' was pronounced with a certain dignity that showed Mr. Bevill was capable of a weakness, and that it lay in the direction of literary composition.)

Mr. Mayne nodded assent.

'Good; then I will not trouble you with matters that are contained in them. My last

statement, if you remember, was that Sir Robert was not, in my opinion, seriously ill. Within a few hours after I had written that opinion I had cause to modify it. I came upon him in the courtyard of the inn, and I thought him looking very ill. It was the first time I had seen him since I discovered his intention to sail for Australia. Perhaps, therefore, his ill-looks arose from mental causes; that idea occurred to me because our gentleman was walking arm in arm with him, and speaking in a tender and yet encouraging tone. Sir Robert had, I thought at the time (but I was wrong), been persuaded by a stronger will to exchange all his old associations for new ones, and was, perhaps, already regretting it.'

If Mr. Bevill could not be said to talk like a book, it was clear that he was talking like a very carefully compiled manuscript—and, in fact, was quoting from it. His own ordinary conversation had nothing in common with this ornate and explanatory style. He was by nature plain of speech, as he himself confessed; but,

'give him time,' and he would turn out something in the way of literature worthy of your critical attention. And he was very proud of this accomplishment.

'From the day when our gentleman and his friend had secured their berths on board the "Apollo,"' he went on, 'I saw very little of them. They kept themselves *to* themselves, or rather our gentleman kept his friend to himself, much more than formerly, and, for one thing, they no more took their meals at the *table d'hôte*. It was understood that Sir R.'s state of health forbade it. As the "Apollo" was to sail with the tide in the early morning, they went on board on the previous afternoon; but, as I understood, they did not dine in the saloon. As for me, I did not wish to show myself to either of them lest I might be recognised as one who had sought their company of late (though I had been as prudent as was possible in so doing) and our gentleman should have had his suspicions aroused before starting. I did not wish him to know that Sir R. had a friend on

board until necessity should compel the revelation.'

This last sentence Mr. Bevill repeated (under the transparent pretence of having forgotten it), with a roll in his voice that greatly enhanced the stately periods.

'I myself delayed going on board the ship until after dusk, and when I did so, at once betook myself to my cabin. Before finally turning in for the night, however, I came on deck for a breath of fresh air, in full confidence that at such an hour I should run no risk of encountering those whom it was my object to avoid. It was half-past nine, and the saloon passengers, who had been smoking and chatting above till it grew cold, had all gone below. I was about to follow their example when I saw our gentleman come up the saloon stairs with a travelling bag in his hand. There would have been hardly sufficient light by which to recognise him, had I not been on the look-out for him, and no one else; but, as it was, I felt quite certain of my man. He went to the side of the

ship, and peered over it, into the semi-darkness. I did the like, taking care to keep myself out of his range of vision, and this is what I saw. There was a boat lying close under me, with Sir Robert himself lying in the stern of it, and just as I had seen him come on board, with all his portmanteaus, boxes, &c., in the bows. Only it was plain that he was now going away instead of embarking. I do assure you, for the moment, I was quite thrown off my balance. It was not what was happening before my eyes, so much as the sense of what might and would have happened but for my just coming up for that mouthful of air—namely, that I should have found myself bound for Australia for no earthly reason; doomed to I don't know how many months of ocean travel, without the least object save to get home again, not to mention the money thrown away by my employer, and the disgrace that would attach to myself in having been thus tricked and deluded.

'All this passed through my mind like a keen blast of air, but did not hinder me from

seeing my gentleman run quickly down the ladder, jump into the boat, and seat himself by the side of Sir R. ; the next moment the rowers had pushed off, and they were gone.'

'And where the deuce were they gone to?' inquired Gresham, impatiently.

'That was the very question that yours truly put to himself, sir,' said Mr. Bevill, breaking into his colloquial style, 'and which, unfortunately, has not been answered yet. Of course, I was for following 'em hot foot ; but that was not so easy. When I asked for a boat to go on shore, the captain of the deck watch didn't see it. He said it was too late ; and that the next time I was put on shore from the "Apollo" it would be in Melbourne harbour. The very notion of this turned me cold again, and I am afraid I found myself bidding higher than I should have done for the accommodation of a boat. The fact was, however, that the officer was afraid of losing his men altogether if he gave them such an opportunity of slipping away on the eve of so long a voyage, and in

the end he consented to put me ashore himself for a five-pound note, which accordingly I paid him. That's gone, I fear, from you and your heirs for ever, sir'—here the speaker turned to Mr. Mayne—'but with regard to the Australian passage-money, I am happy to say I recovered half of it, on a representation of the case to the Navigation Company.'

'That is a secondary matter, Mr. Bevill,' said Mayne, quietly. 'Pray go on with your narrative.'

'I wish I could, sir, but unhappily it ends where I left it; our gentleman got clean away, though not, indeed, without leaving a trail behind him. He had not returned to the hotel, where they quite understood, indeed, he was on his way to Australia; and as I could not gain any information of his movements by land —which, since he was in charge of an invalid, could scarcely have been concealed—I gave my attention to the water. A trading ship, I found, had sailed that very night for England, bound for Weymouth, and on inquiring at the

office, I found our gentleman had engaged berths for himself and Sir R. on board of it, *as well as* on board the "Apollo." '

'But for what possible reason?' exclaimed Gresham.

'Heaven knows, sir,—or, leastways, more likely the other party. I can think of nothing else to explain it but that our gentleman had found out he was being watched, and was resolved to throw one off his tracks at any cost. Yet how he could have persuaded Sir R.—though, indeed, poor soul, he looked in that there boat as though he had very little strength to resist him—to change his plans so completely, and at such short notice—that baffles me altogether.'

'One thing at all events is certain,' observed Gresham, 'that their object is to hide away from all of us.'

'It is the object of our gentleman, no doubt,' replied the detective.

'Mr. Bevill has administered a just reproof to you, Gresham,' observed Mayne. 'It is no

more your uncle's fault that he has adopted this strange course than that yonder signboard swings to the wind. He has not been a free agent for this long time; and now, prostrated by illness——'

'Forgive me,' interrupted Gresham, earnestly. 'I spoke in thoughtlessness, not in bitterness, Heaven knows. The very idea of the influence this scoundrel exercises over the good, kind old man——'

'Fifty-one,' observed Mr. Bevill, sententiously. 'I heard him say so.'

'Well, well; when a man, even in middle life, subordinates his will to another, and voluntarily becomes a cipher, one thinks of him as old,' said Gresham. 'I trust my uncle will live many a year, but among those who love him. To think of this man Walcot, I was about to say, puts me alike out of patience and of reason. That is why you, Mayne, and Mr. Bevill here are such a comfort to me. The only plan that ever occurs to me is to take the scoundrel by h e neck and throttle him.'

'The idea is too charming to dwell upon,' said Mayne, gravely. 'I dare not indulge myself in such luxurious thoughts. Besides, his *neck* is scarcely private property. Jack Ketch has in a manner bespoken it.'

'I hope not, since that will mean murder,' answered Gresham, gloomily; 'in which case one can only too well guess the victim.'

'No, no; our gentleman is not of that sort, sir,' observed Mr. Bevill, assuringly. 'I know the class, and call them the Pouncers; it is always now or never with them. But this one, he is so clever that he don't pounce, but can afford to bide his time. He will never hurry matters in the way you are thinking of.'

'That is quite my view,' remarked Mayne. 'Nature, however, may make things terribly easy for him—his star has fought for him, as it is, beyond all expectation—and time is pressing. I do not speak of the future wrong that may be done to my friend Gresham and others, for that I know is insignificant to them in comparison with the condition of Sir Robert himself,

ill, and in this villain's clutches; conscious, perhaps, by this time, of the true character of his companion, yet physically incapable of escape from him.'

'I see all that, sir,' said Mr. Bevill, slowly. 'The place for me, therefore, seems just now to be Weymouth.'

'By all means,' exclaimed Gresham, earnestly. 'If it was not that I fear my motives would be miscontrued, or rather misrepresented by this scoundrel, I would myself accompany you. What do you say, Mayne?'

'I say "No," Gresham,' was the unexpected rejoinder. 'By Mr. Bevill's account your uncle stands in no immediate danger, either from natural causes or foul play; and I think it would be only just, before taking so decided a step as you propose, to wait a few days, in which he may declare his intentions. If he remains in England for any time—say a week, for example—without communicating with Lady Arden, or any of the family—we may take it for granted that he is under dictation.

Whereas, if it is not so, and you or even Mr. Bevill (whom we have reason to feel Walcot already suspects of dogging him) should go down to Weymouth, it would arouse irritation in Sir Robert's mind and retard, if it does not prevent, its awakening to the true state of affairs.'

'Our gentleman himself could not have looked at the matter all round more judgmatically,' observed Mr. Bevill, in approving tones. 'Let us give him the week, then, and I will remain here in the meantime till you say "Off," sir. If I get a few score of questions answered concerning him in this neighbourhood, it may not be altogether time thrown away.'

Gresham looked from one to the other, with a half-consenting, half-hesitating air.

'This is your business, at least in part, Gresham,' said Mayne, gently. 'Sir Robert is your uncle, not mine; and I should be sorry, indeed, if anything should happen—within these few days—to cause you to repent of following my advice. You will act, of course, as you think right. But I must follow my own

judgment in keeping Mr. Bevill for the present at Mirton. Uncle Ferdy is too shy a bird for us to run the risk of frightening him. We have him now within reach, which is a great point; but should we force him to fly away, things would be made more difficult for us. Moreover Bevill's presence—and much more yours—might cause him to precipitate matters.'

'I put myself in your hands,' said Gresham, after a long pause. 'They are stronger than mine, and fitter, I feel, to deal with such an emergency as this. Let our motto for the present be Patience, and if within a week we do not hear from my uncle, I will take my own way.'

Whereupon Mayne said, 'Agreed;' and Mr. Bevill, 'Right you are, sir.'

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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